

Safarova T.V., candidate of philological sciences, associate professor of the department of theory and history of folk art culture at the Kemerovo state institute of culture, 650029, Kemerovo region, Kemerovo, Voroshilov str., 17; e-mail: nauka_kemgik@mail.ru

Horn and bone carving by the Essay Yakuts as a type of traditional art craft: current state

Abstract. The article examines the current state of traditional art crafts of the Essay Yakuts. Special attention is given to artistic horn and bone carving as an important marker of the traditional culture of this ethnolocal group. It is noted that the culture of the Essay people represents a complex synthesis of the Yakut ethno-cultural basis and elements of the Evenki economic and everyday tradition, formed under conditions of long-term isolation. Based on the analysis of works by contemporary bone carvers, in particular D.Kh. Espek, the features of the subject-figurative system of Essay bone carving art are revealed (central images of deer and totemic birds, absence of scenes from the Ysyakh festival, etc.). The necessity of preserving and supporting traditional art crafts through exhibition activities, festivals, competitions and educational initiatives, as well as through involving youth in this activity, is emphasized.

Keywords: Essay Yakuts, bone carving art, horn and bone carving, traditional culture, artistic bone processing, cultural identity, Northern peoples.

The study of the traditions of the Essay Yakuts as a sub-ethnic group is highly relevant at present due to, firstly, the uniqueness of this ethnic group, which possesses original cultural practices, and secondly, the isolation of their residence and the discussion on granting the Essay Yakuts the status of an indigenous small-numbered people of the North, Siberia and the Far East (in 2013, the Essay Yakuts received the status of an indigenous small-numbered people so far only at the level of Krasnoyarsk region).

The aim of this research is to examine horn and bone carving as a marker of the traditional culture of the Essay Yakuts and to identify its features in modern conditions.

Essay or Krasnoyarsk Yakuts (bootulu), Essays are a separate group of Yakuts that has been living since the 17th century in the Evenki municipal district of Krasnoyarsk region (in the area of the Arctic lake Essay). Being a sub-ethnos of the Yakut people, they have preserved elements of the ancient culture of the Sakha people to our day (the vast majority of Essays consider themselves part of the Yakut ethnos). Moreover, despite decades spent in a foreign environment, among the Evenki Yakuts, ethnic self-consciousness is very developed and the spirit of the Yakut ethnos is strong. Some Essays even claim that, having lived separately from the main body of Yakuts for over a hundred years, “they have preserved in a pure form the culture and identity of the Sakha people, which is sometimes lost in their

historical homeland” [4]. In particular, one can speak of the preservation of the Yakut language by the Essays. However, being isolated from the main mass of Yakuts (living in the Lena basin), their dialect is archaic and contains a large number of borrowings from Evenki and some other languages. The research of linguist M.S. Voronkin confirms that the phonetics and vocabulary of the Essays dialect are unique [3].

Currently, the culture of the Essay Yakuts represents a complex synthesis with the dominance of Yakut self-identity (including its linguistic component) under the significant influence of the Evenki economic and domestic culture.

Modern Essay Yakuts have preserved the following types of traditional art crafts and handicrafts (which are generally characteristic of most peoples of the North) to a greater or lesser extent:

- artistic processing of bone, deer horn and cow horn;
- artistic processing of fur and leather;
- manufacturing of jewelry, including from beads and silver;
- wood carving;
- sewing of national clothing and footwear;
- artistic processing of birch bark.

As for the latter, it should be noted that at present, Essay Yakuts have practically stopped making birch bark tableware and leaf bark is used only for covering the roofs of winter huts, building shelters, lining the bottom of cellars, making boxes for firewood, coal, etc. But in general, interest in this type of folk craft remains high, which is evidenced, in particular, by the regular holding of master classes in the institutions of the Evenki municipal district, which enjoy constant demand among the younger generation [5].

The most distinctive art of the Essay people is reflected in the artistic processing of bone and horn, as well as in the sewing of fur products (primarily clothing and footwear) decorated with national ornamentation. The popularity of the latter craft is explained by the harsh Siberian climate, which at all times dictated the need for comfortable and very warm clothing. The wide development of carving arts among many peoples of the North (and among Krasnoyarsk Yakuts as well) is explained, among other things, by the fact that hunting crafts were very widespread in the North, providing northern ethnic groups with such once-popular materials as walrus tusk, as well as mammoth bones and tusks, which are well preserved in permafrost areas. Ethnographers and art historians record a stable tradition of using mammoth tusk in the works of northern bone carvers. Let us draw attention to the fact that the Yakut school of bone carving is based on a historically established tradition of working specifically with mammoth tusk; this is explained by the fact that 80–90% of the world's reserves of mammoth ivory are concentrated precisely in Yakutia.

As for the walrus tusk, its use in art also takes place, but is strictly regulated (extraction is permitted exclusively to indigenous small-numbered peoples of the North within the framework of traditional nature management and under strictly established quotas).

Currently, the most accessible materials (including in terms of cost) for Essay bone carvers are reindeer horn and cow horn.

For several generations, the Essays have been reviving the bone carving art of their ancient people, enriching it with new images and interesting solutions. This also applies to the younger generation, which is interested in this type of creativity that requires certain skills, experience, time and considerable patience. “In our family there was always quite a lot of this material – processed cow horn left by my father. Processing horn is a rather labor-intensive process. <...> Since I had creative abilities since childhood, I decided to touch upon this old and amazing form of folk art as well. Using traditional technology for processing cow horn, I made the simplest pencil stands, knife blanks and a comb. To make buttons from horn scraps and shavings, a mass was formed, which was subsequently processed. For making the comb, both ancient and modern tools were used: a hook, a lathe, saws, a vise and pumice stone. Openwork sawing was applied using hand molding...” [from an interview with correspondence student of Kemerovo state institute of culture G.V. Botulu].

Currently, one can speak about the existence of a unique Essays subculture, where a powerful layer of Evenki economic and material tradition has been superimposed on a Yakut (linguistic and identification) core. At the same time, Essays bone carvers are characterized by a desire to preserve and develop the national and cultural identity, primarily of the Sakha people, since the adherence of this subethnos to the spiritual community of the Yakuts is evident.

It should be noted that there are currently no professional artists engaged in traditional art crafts in the Evenki municipal district. However, there are skilled craftsmen whose work represents a significant and unique phenomenon occupying a special place in the culture of the Essay Yakuts. For example, D.Kh. Espek (born 1956), a self-taught master who has been carving horn, bone and wood since his youth, is a participant and laureate of all-Russian and international exhibitions, competitions and festivals; he works as a bone carver master at the Folk Arts Center in the settlement of Tura.

As one of the general features of modern Yakut bone carving art, it can be noted that some Yakut masters are fascinated by the cultural traditions of other peoples (such as traditional Japanese miniature sculpture netsuke), as well as by the traditions of the indigenous small-numbered peoples of the North, which are historically close to them. At the same time, the works are mainly created within the framework of the national mentality, but in the process of interaction between cultural traditions, Yakut bone carving art has been enriched with new techniques while preserving its national characteristics.

The same can be said about the work of Essay masters. Some specific features of bone carving have been noted, reflecting the distinctiveness of the Essays as an ethno-local group of Yakuts, as well as their adherence to the authentic traditions of Yakut bone carvers. This is primarily demonstrated by examples from the

animalistic genre, which most craftsmen are fond of; they carve figurines of animals such as reindeer, horses, bears and dogs (Fig. 1⁷⁷).

If some of the most popular images among Yakut bone carvers are the horse and the hitching post (serge), then for the Essays it is the reindeer (Figs. 2⁷⁸, 3⁷⁹).

The Yakuts considered the horse to be an animal of heavenly origin. In the life of nomadic herdsmen, the horse played an exceptional role, serving as a means of transportation, a source of food and a rider's assistant. Therefore, practically all Yakut bone carvers turn to the image of the horse and scenes associated with it. Traditional subjects became widespread in the works of V.P. Popov ("Yakut woman at the hitching post") and S.N. Pesterev ("An old Yakut wedding"), "where the masters accurately depicted the festivity of the scenes, the adornment of the horses, the detailed clothing of the people and the ornamental hitching posts" [6, p. 179].



Fig. 1. D. Espek. Composition "Lynx on a tree" (deer antler)

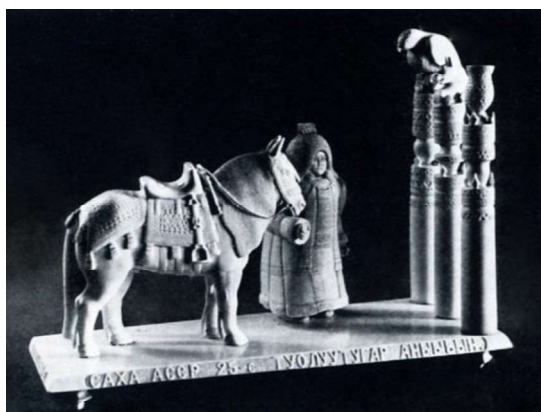


Fig. 2. V.P. Popov.
Composition "Yakut woman at the hitching post". 1947.
National art museum of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia)



Fig. 3. D. Espek. Composition "Sled team" (moose antler)

⁷⁷ Fig. 1. Artistic metal, stone and bone processing. Dmitry Khristoforovich Espek // Electronic catalog of masters and artists "Masters of Krasnoyarsk region" : site. – URL: <https://krasfolk.info/catalog/profile/2/29/0/188> (date of access: 28.04.2026).

⁷⁸ Fig. 2. The revival of artistic bone carving in the post-war period // Wood and bone carving : site. – URL: <http://rezchiku.ru/books/item/f00/s00/z00000003/st010.shtml> (date of access: 28.04.2026).

⁷⁹ Fig. 3. Artistic metal, stone and bone processing. Dmitry Khristoforovich Espek // Electronic catalog of masters and artists "Masters of Krasnoyarsk region" : site. – URL: <https://krasfolk.info/catalog/profile/2/29/0/188> (date of access: 01.05.2026).

In contrast to the majority of Yakuts, who are cattle breeders and horse herders, the Essay Yakuts are classic reindeer herders who saddled reindeer (while the Yakuts typically used reindeer only as draft animals in sled teams). As a consequence, the fur clothing of the Essays was adapted for riding reindeer, and its cut and ornamentation resembled those of the Yakuts. One can cite another well-known historical fact: in ancient times, funerals among these peoples were accompanied by the sacrifice of an animal, with the Essays sacrificing a reindeer and the Yakuts – a horse. The origins of the differences in the imagery systems used by bone carvers lie deep in antiquity.

A significant place in the work of Krasnoyarsk Yakuts is occupied by sacred totemic birds, which, according to the beliefs of their ancestors, protect Essay families from evil spirits. Thus, for the Espek clan, the sacred bird is the koksha (Siberian jay), for the Botulu – the eagle (orlan), for the Maymaga – the swan, for the Osogostok – the raven, and for the Chordu – the tufted duck. The loon often serves as a totem bird and is associated with several Essay legends. Sacred birds are still worshipped and revered; up to the present day, the Essays do not hunt them. The significance of a particular bird among the Essays is due to its status as the progenitor of a specific family. For the Yakuts of the Republic of Sakha, the cults of the eagle and the white crane (sterkh) are especially important.

For over a hundred years, bone carvers of Central Yakutia have depicted scenes of the most significant ancient Yakut festival – the celebration of the sun Ysyakh. “The composition by an unknown master ‘Ysyakh’ from the mid-19th century is considered one of the earliest depictions of the summer festival”. It should be emphasized that turning to subjects related to the Ysyakh holiday is characteristic of both works from past years and modern ones. For example, D.I. Ilyin: “At the Kumys Festival Ysyakh” (1946), where the principle of constructing a composition from figures, typical of old masters, was used; S.N. Pesterev: “Opening of the Ysyakh Festival” (1967); Modern art: In 2020, a presentation of F.I. Markov’s composition “Ysyakh”, made from mammoth tusk for the British Museum, was held at the National art museum of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) (Fig. 4⁸⁰).

As for the Essays, subjects dedicated to celebrating Ysyakh, as well as other Yakut ritual and ceremonial traditions (with the exception of shamanic practices (Fig. 5⁸¹), perhaps), have virtually not been reflected in their art. This can be explained by the fact that since 1940, the main Yakut holiday was absent for the Essay Yakuts. And only since 2013 has the revival of this primordial tradition begun, which has not yet found its embodiment in bone carving art.

⁸⁰ Fig. 4. Composition “Ysyakh” by Fyodor Ivanovich Markov // Union of artists of Russia: site.– URL: <https://www.shr.su/news/novosti-regionov/kompozitsii-ysyakh-fedora-ivanovicha-markova/> (date of access: 28.04.2026).

⁸¹ Fig. 5. Artistic metal, stone and bone processing. Dmitry Khristoforovich Espek // Electronic catalog of masters and artists “Masters of Krasnoyarsk region” : site. – URL: <https://krasfolk.info/catalog/profile/2/29/0/188> (date of access: 28.04.2026).



Fig. 4. F.I. Markov. Composition “Ysyakh” (mammoth tusk).
2020. The British Museum

Speaking about the ways to preserve traditional culture, we note the following. One of the main methods for preserving the traditional arts and crafts of the Essays is, in our view, the organization of exhibition activities (primarily trade-fair exhibitions), festivals and competitions of traditional culture, as well as the celebration of national holidays with the mandatory support of state authorities and local self-government bodies.

One of the necessary conditions for the development of Essay Yakut crafts is attracting young people to this ancient, yet still in-demand art. Although technological progress has brought certain changes to the development of traditional art crafts (new mechanisms have appeared that make the master's work easier and speed up some operations), nevertheless, no machine can replace the handmade nature of works of traditional art crafts and the individuality of creating each item; therefore, horn and bone carving will always remain a marker of the traditional culture of the northern ethnic groups.



Fig. 5. D. Espek. Statuette
“Shaman” (reindeer
antler)

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