

Special  
Issue 19

Sakha

## KinoKultura

[KiKu Home](#) :: [Articles](#) :: [Reviews](#) :: [Videos](#) :: [Guidelines](#)**Ellei Ivanov: *Cursed Land (Setteekh sir, 1996)*****reviewed by Csaba Mészáros © 2022**

*Cursed Land (Setteekh Sir)*, together with a few other Sakha films, like *Hostile Land (Sibienneekh Sir)*, directed by Konstantin Timofeev in 2008, and *Night Maiden (Tüngnñü Kyys)*, directed by Gennadii Bagynanov in 2011, gives foreign audiences an impression of the complex relationship between Sakha and their landscape. These films testify to the Sakha notion that landscapes are much more than clusters of various live and inanimate entities that appear as an integrated whole to a passing observer. The Sakha landscape is not a frozen picture that passively allows the onlooker to gaze upon it. It is—like other earthly beings—an animate and sentient being with a soul, memories, and intentions. In most cases, these landscapes are benevolent and peacefully coexist with humans. Their past and history are closely interrelated with those Sakha with whom they lived together.



Therefore, Sakha landscapes are impregnated with history and have unique character traits. These attributes, however, are unknown to those who first encounter them. The film *Cursed Land* provides a thick and detailed description of such an encounter. At the beginning of the film, there is a short explanation of how hostile lands come into being, and a notice that the film is based on real-life events. The film follows the changing relationship between a family and the meadow in which they chose to reside—a meadow they do not know well at the outset, and which is rough 30 kilometers from the nearest village.

An elderly lady, Ölöksös Grandma, who is a native of the landscape, lives in a near settlement and takes it upon herself to explain the recent history of this land to the head of the family. She explains that the meadow has always been harmful and hostile to humans, and that many years ago, its evil spirit caused problems for the

local cooperative farm. The head of the cooperative farm, to mitigate the loss of livestock, visited a nearby elderly shaman and asked him to heal the land. The shaman entered a trance for three days, and in the end, was able to push the evil spirit back, but could not completely heal the land because (in accordance with socialist values) he was not allowed to finish the ritual. The land, and thus, the meadow, remained a dangerous place, hostile to humans and potentially harmful for any newcomers.

The film does not explain why this meadow turned against humans in the first place, or why it maintained strong connections with the malevolent creatures of the Lower World, as, according to traditional Sakha ontology, the World consists of three interrelated Worlds: the Lower World where evil monsters (*abaahy*) reside; the Middle World that offers habitat for animals, humans, plants, and spirits; and the Upper World, where benevolent deities (*tangara*) reside. The one thing that is clear is that the shaman was able to communicate with it and that he could temporarily settle the conflict between the land and the human newcomers. The family (the wife, husband, and small baby), however, were unable to communicate with the evil spirit of the meadow. The only way they experienced the presence of the meadow's spirit was through visions and dreams. These were all frightening images, and yet, the head of the family, the husband, decided it would be best to stay in the meadow and spend the winter in the settlement, unlike any other humans in the Soviet era.



According to the Sakha's worldview, living beings are more likely to be exposed to harm caused by evil entities in winter. This is the case with the family in the film. One day, when the husband rides out to herd his horses together, the evil spirit approaches his family's house. First, only the baby realizes the threat, but soon Ölöksös Grandma (who is visiting at the time) understands that they have to enter the house and ask for the help of good-willed spirits. When the husband (who was threatened by the evil spirit on his way home) arrives shaken with horror, the family reunites and gathers around the kitchen oven. With a fire going in the oven, Ölöksös Grandma carries out a short ritual of feeding the fire and asking the fire spirit to protect the family.

They are safe in the house, but Ölöksös grandma leaves to communicate with the spirit; it turns out that there is not just one evil spirit, but many—all souls of Sakha ancestors who resided in the area before, including Ölöksös Grandma's own mother. Ölöksös Grandma does not return to the house, but joins them and sacrifices herself to save the young family. The following day, after the old lady sacrificed herself, the family understands that they can no longer live in this meadow and move back to the nearest village.

The film's conclusion is more complex than the story of self-sacrifice, however; at the end of the film, three explanatory subtitles are presented, explaining that Ölöksös Grandma died of a heart attack, the family moved back to the village, and within a few years, the land and the settlement were peacefully settled by new families. The history of the meadow gradually faded away.

A Sakha proverb says that all lands have a name, and all areas have their history (*Alaas aattaakh, dojdu surakhtaakh*). Human presence is always an intrinsic attribute of a territory. The word "territory" itself is expressed in Sakha by a hendiadys meaning land and fire (*sir-uot*). For Sakha, it is not the pristine environment or nature which lies in contrast to the human sphere, but territories with a shared history with humans, and unknown, unencountered spaces: physical spaces about which one does not have sensory experiences. The non-responsive Other.

Reflecting on this unique Sakha perspective on the coexistence of land and humans, one may provide an alternative interpretation for the film. From this perspective, this film tells us the story of a complicated and troubled relationship between a meadow and its Sakha dwellers, rather than a horror story in a mystical environment. Yet it also suggests that the intimate and emotional connection between humans and non-humans is withering, alienating Sakha from their homeland.



Csaba Mészáros

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*Cursed Land*, Sakha/Russia, 1996

Color, 54 min

Director: Ellei Ivanov

Cameraman: Eduard Novikov

Script: Semen Ermolaev

Art director: Innokentii Barakhtyrov

Cast: Dariia Zhirkova, Nadezhda Ushnickaia, Petr Basnaev, Nastia Pavluckaia

Production: Sakhatelefil'm

**Ellei Ivanov: *Cursed Land* (*Setteekh sir*, 1996)**

**reviewed by Csaba Mészáros © 2022**

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