

Tomasz Ewertowski

Shanghai International Studies University, Shanghai
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1133-137X>
t.ewertowski@gmail.com

Sieroszewski, Poland, Sakha: Questions of Identity

Book Review: Kyunney Takasaeva (Künnej Takaahaj) (2020),
*Jakuckie prace Waclawa Sieroszewskiego i zmiany kulturowe
narodu Sacha*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo DiG.

Abstract

The article presents the book entitled *Jakuckie prace Waclawa Sieroszewskiego i zmiany kulturowe narodu Sacha* [Waclaw Sieroszewski's Yakut Works and the Sakha Nation's Cultural Changes] by Kyunney Takasaeva (Künnej Takaahaj). This work combines two main threads: an analysis of Waclaw Sieroszewski's works, and reflections on the history, political situation, and cultural identity of the Sakha (Yakut) people. The article positions Takasaeva's book within the field of identity studies.

Keywords: Waclaw Sieroszewski, Siberia, Sakha (Yakut) people, identity.

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Kyunney Takasaeva's book *Jakuckie prace Waclawa Sieroszewskiego* [Ki zmiany kulturowe narodu Sacha [Waclaw Sieroszewski's Yakut Works and Cultural Changes in the Sakha Nation]] deals with a topic that is abundantly covered in the literature, nevertheless it remains an exceptional work.

Exile to Siberia is one of the key elements of Polish heritage, so it has attracted the attention of many scholars. Both literary fiction describing the exile and documentary literature written by deported Poles have been examined from various angles and are still a subject of recent research conducted by scholars from Poland and beyond (Chrostek, 2008; Gentes, 2017; Głuszkowski, 2017; Kuczyński, 1988, 1998; Shostakovich et al., 2011). Waclaw Sieroszewski does not belong to the pantheon of classics, nevertheless he is an author included in the Polish literary canon, so his works and astonishing biography continue to invoke curiosity of researchers (Kijak, 2010; Kołodziejczyk, 2023; Sadowska, 2007; Sieroszewski, 2015). One might ask: what makes Takasaeva's book extraordinary if Sieroszewski and Siberian topics in general have been the subject of scholarly analysis relatively often?

To some extent, the answer lies in the fact that Takasaeva, a researcher of Sakha (Yakut) ethnicity, discusses familiar Polish-Siberian topics from the perspective of the Sakha culture, which has been largely absent in the Polish reflection on Siberian exiles. In the preface to her book on race, science and Polishness in the German Empire, Portuguese-American scholar Lenny A. Ureña Valerio remarks, "I was often asked about my personal relationship to my field of studies. The message usually implied in the question was that a scholar needed to be of Polish or German descent to become interested in the history of the region" (Ureña Valerio, 2019). Takasaeva is not Polish, but hardly anyone would dare question her in a similar manner, because Sieroszewski spent 12 years as an exile in Yakutia and established himself there as both a fiction writer and an ethnographer by writing on Yakut topics. His works were reprinted in the Sakha Republic in the 1990s, almost 100 years after their initial publication. However, the value of Takasaeva's book is by no means reduced to a presentation of the Sakha point of view. As noted by Wojciech Lipiński, in the last few decades there have been no monographs about Yakuts in Polish, and this book is outstanding for its topic and interdisciplinary character (Lipiński, 2020, p. 264).

Jakuckie prace Waclawa Sieroszewskiego... combines two main threads: an analysis of Sieroszewski's works, and reflections on the history, political situation, and cultural identity of the Sakha people. The methodological

framework is based on microhistory, cultural anthropology, and postcolonial theory.

The main part of the book is divided into three large chapters, each comprising a few sections. The first chapter, “Yakutia in Colonial Times: Formation of the Sakha (Yakut) National Identity”, starts with a description of how Sieroszewski characterised the Sakha self-identity. It is followed by a section on the image of the Yakut national character in Russian, Polish and other European travelogues. The third section explains the role of exiled intellectuals in the development of the Yakut national identity, providing an interesting example of intercultural dialogue. The final section is devoted to the first generations of indigenous Sakha intelligentsia and the repressions they faced in Soviet times.

The title of the second chapter, “Sieroszewski and Yakut Questions in Soviet and Post-Soviet Times”, is somewhat confusing, since its first section does concern pre-1917 realities. It introduces a very interesting parallel between Sieroszewski and another scholar, Edward Piekarski. Both were exiled to Yakutia and both built their subsequent careers there thanks to research on the local culture, during which important roles were played by their female Yakut partners. Here, Takasaeva touches on very important and relevant issues of interpersonal relations in a colonial situation and of the untold contributions of indigenous women to imperial knowledge (Schär, 2022). The second section of this chapter describes the effects of Soviet rule in Yakutia, while the third focuses on the reception of Sieroszewski’s work in the contemporary Sakha Republic.

The third chapter (“Wacław Sieroszewski’s Yakut Works from the Perspective of Postcolonial Discourse”) may be less interesting to historians and anthropologists, but is of crucial importance to literary scholars. In the first section, Takasaeva questions the most widespread and popular interpretations of Sieroszewski’s work, convincingly showing that naturalist, impressionist, exoticist and martyrological paradigms are not sufficient to analyse the Polish writer’s works. The next two sections are less convincing and comprehensive but still thought-provoking, for they discuss parallels between Sieroszewski and Joseph Conrad-Korzeniowski and the influence of Romantic poets like Adam Mickiewicz and Juliusz Słowacki on the Polish writer. The fourth section of this chapter analyses how Yakut realities were presented in Sieroszewski’s works, including Yakut symbolism. The final section introduces the topic of borderlands and discusses Sieroszewski’s works as a description of the Sakha people’s hybrid identity.

As this short summary shows, Takasaeva's monograph covers a wide range of topics and uses diverse research methods. Some sections contain a broad historical narrative, some represent a microhistory approach, others delve into a literary analysis of Sieroszewski's writings, and there are also anthropological remarks about contemporary Sakha society. The focal point is the question of identity, which is asked in different contexts. What was the importance of the Siberian experience for Sieroszewski's identity? How did the Polish identity of other exiles influence their views of the Sakha? Sieroszewski's daughter Maria was born in Yakutia to a Sakha mother, but lived in Moscow for most of her life. How, then, can her identity be described? Maybe the most important question is that of Sakha identity. The Sakha people migrated far north from other Turkic peoples and experienced radical changes in living conditions through the centuries. Subjected to exploitation and Russification, the Sakha people were simultaneously modernising their lifestyle while trying to hold on to ancient traditions (see the very interesting segment about "neopagan" movements in the Sakha Republic). The materials analysed and interpreted by Takasaeva open up a wide range of stimulating topics far beyond the immediate context of Sieroszewski's works and Sakha culture. For example, the role played by Polish exiles in the development of Russia's North Asian possessions directs readers' attention to various levels of involvement in imperialism, because people like Sieroszewski simultaneously were victims of the Russian Empire and contributed to its development. Interactions between Sakha, Poles and Russians described through the lens of microhistory reveal certain intricate relations among different peoples in a situation of colonial domination. The compelling analysis of humanistic images of the Sakha people in the Polish writer's works is a powerful reminder that traditional categories like "exoticism" do not always render justice to literary works with a complex content.

Jakuckie prace Wacława Sieroszewskiego... is devoted to Sakha issues, so, unsurprisingly, one question which is not addressed in the book is the relation between Sieroszewski's works about Yakuts and his writings about East Asian peoples like Koreans, Japanese, and Chinese. Takasaeva commends his ability to include the indigenous Sakha perspective in his writings, which seems to contrast with the critical opinions of Korean scholars about Sieroszewski's book on Korea (An, 2012; Lee, 2017). Therefore, it might be interesting if, in the future, Takasaeva could conduct a comparative analysis of the Polish writer's views on the various peoples of East Asia.

Its far-reaching scope and extensive material notwithstanding, Takasaeva's book is not without its failings. Some factual errors and language issues have been pointed out by Lipiński in his review (Lipiński, 2020, pp. 267–268). The very interesting section on Sieroszewski's Yakut daughter Maria would benefit from consideration of the extensively annotated edition of her letters to her father (Legutko, 2019). Furthermore, although Takasaeva applies postcolonial theory to Sieroszewski's writings in an interesting way, she still has not made the most of the potential of such an approach. As noted by Jan Sowa, the applications of postcolonialism to Polish studies are too often restricted to "ritual" references to Edward Said and superficial remarks about Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Sowa, 2011, pp. 438–439), without making use of less popular works. Takasaeva also uses a limited number of works representing postcolonial theory. Finally, as mentioned above, the book encompasses a wide range of topics and methodologies. This is a double-edged sword; on the one hand, it adds great value to this monograph because it brings together various themes. On the other hand, sometimes the book resembles a mosaic that combines incompatible fragments. This is the price Takasaeva pays for the wide scope of her research and her interdisciplinary approach.

Despite those shortcomings, *Jakuckie prace Wacława Sieroszewskiego i zmiany kulturowe narodu Sacha* is a truly remarkable work of importance not only to scholars of Sieroszewski's work and heritage, but also for research on wider themes like cultural changes among indigenous peoples in a colonial situation or exoticism in literature. As such, it can be recommended to a wide range of readers.

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Sieroszewski, Polska, Sacha: pytania o tożsamość

Recenzja książki Kyunney Takasaewej (Künnej Takaahaj) *Jakuckie prace Waława Sieroszewskiego i zmiany kulturowe narodu Sacha*,
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W artykule prezentowana jest książka Kyunney Takasaewej (Künnej Takaahaj) *Jakuckie prace Waława Sieroszewskiego i zmiany kulturowe narodu Sacha*. Monografia Takasaewej łączy dwa główne wątki: analizę dzieł Waława Sieroszewskiego oraz rozważania nad historią, sytuacją polityczną i tożsamością kulturową Sacha (Jakutów). Artykuł umieszcza pracę Takasaewej w kontekście studiów nad tożsamością.

Słowa kluczowe: Waław Sieroszewski, Syberia, Sacha (Jakuci), tożsamość.

Note

Tomasz Ewertowski, Shanghai International Studies University, Shanghai, China.

t.ewertowski@gmail.com

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1133-137X>

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