

NEWLY EMERGED INDEPENDENT HERDERS AND THE HORSE TRUST SYSTEM AMONG SAKHA AGRO-PASTORALISTS IN SIBERIA: SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONDITIONS IN THE POST-SOCIALIST ERA

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In this study, I examined the practice of independent horse herding among the Sakha people of northern Russia in the post-Soviet era. I considered the cultural role of the horse, as well as socio-economic behaviors relating to the market-economy institutions used by these indigenous Siberians.

The Sakhas, the northernmost of the Turkic peoples, have traditionally engaged in horse and cattle husbandry. However, socialist policies under the former Soviet government collectivized their livestock production and sedentarized their way of life. Since then, two types of livestock have fulfilled different roles in the indigenous rural economy: cattle for milk production and horses for meat production. Cattle and horse husbandry methods differ sharply. Cattle are kept in enclosures or sheds, either at a collective farm or at individual homesteads, while horses are allowed free range in collectively held pastures. Since the fall of the socialist state farm system, these differences have affected socio-economic behaviors in response to privatization.

Here, I focus on changing practices in the agro-pastoral economy with respect to the livestock trust system and independent herders. In this trust system, applied only to horses, independent herders care for villagers' mares in remote pastures and are paid a commission for their work. The possession of mares ensures that households will have meat from the foals every autumn. The new legal concept of private property should logically encourage the horse trust system because, now, anyone, regardless of place of residence, can own as many livestock as they can afford. In this paper, I focus on trends and patterns of horse ownership, and describe those who engage in the trust system and how this system is supported in the Sakhas' social context, with a focus on the independent herders. I show that horse husbandry involving the trust system is much more adaptive to the current market economy. The system also reveals the relationship between the economy and ecology, as the nature of horse behavior constrains possession practices.

Overall, this presentation sets out ethnographic details of the Sakha people and outlines how their economy is embedded in their society and environment; property relations in the post-socialist era are also taken into account. Among pastoralist societies worldwide, those of Siberia have had a long history of experience with modes of control and modernization under the modern state system. In the discussion, I suggest some possible implications for comparative nomadic pastoralists studies arising from this study.

Keywords: Horse husbandry, Post-socialist condition, Sakha, Siberia, Trust of livestock