

Proposed Title

Reindeer, Dogs, Horses, and Furs: A Critical Ethnography of Hunting Economies among the Tozhu of Southern Siberia (Republic of Tyva, Russian Federation)

Abstract

The Tozhu hunter-reindeer herders in the Republic of Tyva keep three domesticated animals in the taiga environment: reindeer, horses, and dogs. Each animal has a different function depending on environmental and social situation. While a reindeer is considered the best means of transportation in the taiga environment, a dog is a reliable hunting partner, and a horse is a necessary substitute for a reindeer in summer. Due to social and political changes, the values of these animals also have changed over time. Although reindeer remain highly valued animals compared to dogs and horses, their pragmatic value to some degree have declined recently due to extensive hunting activities. In the pre-Soviet period hunter-reindeer herders kept more reindeer in their herds, particularly up to 400 head. During the Soviet era, large-scale herds were imposed by the system of collective farms and reindeer herding became one of the principal economic activities. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the number of reindeer and hunter-herders has drastically declined. With the rising prices on sable fur and musk deer glands hunting has increased in the global markets for the last ten years, consequently the number of reindeer is purposely cut down from 40 to 60 head. The basic subsistence shifted from reindeer herding to hunting as it was in the past, pre-Soviet era. Nevertheless, fur hunting still was one of the major occupations. Needless to say, reindeer also have a symbolic value. A Tozhu shamanic drum has a spirit of a reindeer. While performing a ritual, a shaman enters into the spiritual world by riding a reindeer. In addition, many Tozhu songs are about riding a reindeer during the hunting trip in the taiga.

On the one hand, the pragmatic value of dogs, which always play an important role in hunting economy, has comparatively increased due to social, political, and economic changes. Dogs enhance hunting success, particularly during the hunting season when hunter-herders hunt predominantly sables and musk deer. It is necessary to keep three to four dogs for a household in order to manage hunting economy successfully because the hunting abilities of dogs vary. On the other hand, dogs also continue to retain a symbolic value, they are regarded as strong protectors which is why they are included in some shamanic prayers. It is common that some Tyvan shamans have dog spirit-helpers.

Horses are used as transportation for summer and they are not considered to be livestock with the high pragmatic value. However, hunter-herders became more dependent on them since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. With the disappearance of Soviet infrastructure and state subsidies nobody brought food to the taiga. Thus, hunter-herders have to go to villages for supplies or to take care of personal business. Horses are an excellent substitute for reindeer in the warm seasons, while reindeer are substitute for horses in the taiga for the rest of the year. Practically hunter-herders ride horses for six to seven month per year and their role among hunter-herders still remains underestimated. Despite their low pragmatic value, their symbolic value is still high among the Tyva (The Tozhu identified themselves as the Tyva). Many traditions, rituals, and ways of thinking are seen through the prism of 'the horse'. The majority of Tyvan folk songs are devoted to a nomad who is coming back home from a long journey. He usually admires the beauty of the country and, of course, the beauty of his horse and its amble.

It is necessary to note the demise of the Soviet system coincided with a shift in fur fashion, which affected fur trade. Although the fur trend became stronger, it has experienced a shift that focused mostly on mink and fur of other animals. Squirrels, which were popular for hundreds of years, became (and still are) out of fashion and had the lowest prices. Today squirrels garments are rarely seen in the international fur fashion shows. Also, their numbers drastically have reduced all throughout the taiga. Mink, another commodity which was historically hunted in Siberia, was highly prized for its fur. Russia developed commercial farming because caged mink fur quality was denser, longer, and softer compared to wild mink fur. Wild mink also was (and still are) not accepted anymore in Tyva. Hunted wild animals, like sables and musk deer, have very high pragmatic values as products to be bartered or traded and their meat is food source for dogs and humans. Another factor of environmental nature actually created favorable conditions for sable hunting is wildfires. The taiga is susceptible to many wildfires. The fires burnt away some of the territories, and sable migrated to hunting territories of the Tozhu. Also, the symbolic value of sables can be seen in Tyvan oral traditions, fairytales and folk songs. As for musk deer, the Tozhu people widely use its fang for protection purposes from bad spirits and energy. This animal is considered the only one who bears features of nine animals (has fangs like a wild boar, hooves like a deer, etc.). Through hunting as economic activity, the Tozhu are able to continue their traditional way of life with their forever beloved companions—their reindeer, dogs, and horses. Three factors of the post-socialist era—political change, environmental change, and re-orientation in subsistence in the Tozhu taiga—affected changes on social significance of domesticated and wild animals as well as human-animal relations.

A review of history of a complex process of hunting, reindeer herding, fur global markets reveals re-orientation from hunting to reindeer herding and later from reindeer herding to hunting. Through historical and ethnographic research I attempt to understand the pragmatic and symbolic values of reindeer, dogs, horses, and wild game of the Tozhu hunter-reindeer herders. Little is known about the contemporary livelihoods among the taiga hunter-reindeer herders. Hunting and fur trade (and barter) as well as dogs and horses in taiga conditions, have been neglected in ethnographic literature and this study aims to fill this gap. I argue that changing socio-economic conditions impact hierarchy, prestige, and values of reindeer, dogs, horses, and wild animals among hunter-herders as well as hunting and reindeer herding practices. The analysis of hunting techniques, tactics, and tools and how they have changed over the course of time as well as how human-relations have changed with the domesticated animals, sheds clear light on historic and present hunting and reindeer herding economies.