

Arctic Pastoralist Sakha: Ethnography of Evolution and Microadaptation in Siberia

Hiroki Takakura

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Anthropological studies focusing on environment and nature began gaining prominence in the 1990s; anthropological field studies in Siberia likewise also began to focus on local environmental perception, land use, and human/non-human relations. In compliance with this trend, Yakutia has faced the emergence of many domestic and international anthropological/ethnographic studies and research projects examining the Sakha cattle and horse economy, as well as those engaging with changes in both land use and local ecologies.

Hiroki Takakura has played a pivotal role in these studies for decades, both as a participant and organizer. The reviewed book consists of the author's previously published and thoroughly revised articles in English and Japanese. The introductory and the concluding chapters are new and aim to contextualize all materials and argumentation under a unified framework. Takakura has conducted fieldwork in Yakutia since the early 1990s and has experience in rural Sakha and Even lifestyles and communities. Although his early studies initially focused on reindeer herder communities in northern Yakutia, later he carried out research among cattle and horse breeder Sakhas in central Yakutia as well. *Arctic Pastoralist Sakha* is the summary of his subsequent fieldwork carried out in a dozen of village communities in central Yakutia.

The book describes the adaptive strategies of Sakhas residing in probably one of the harshest climatic regions of the northern hemisphere. By doing so, the author tackles most of the important facets of local subsistence, that is obtaining ice and water, making hay, managing pastures, and herding horses. Rich ethnographic data (especially on hayfield and pasture management) support the author's assumption that arctic pastoralism cannot be restricted to reindeer breeding—a topic so widely discussed in current anthropological scholarship. I agree with the author in that the Sakha and Northern Tungus co-existence in northeastern Siberia provides a good example to illustrate that under the same climatic and similar geographic conditions, two different kinds of pastoralism may function simultaneously.



The two focal points of Takakura's arguments lie in the process of *microadaptation* and the concept of *dual economy*. The process of microadaptation, as opposed to macroadaptation, is a concept which describes short-term adaptation processes. In the case of Sakhas it provides a valid theoretical framework for the study of local economic strategies emerging after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the demise of a planned economy. As a corollary, microadaptation takes place in a narrow band of time and does not allow researchers to predict or point out which adaptive strategies are successful and which ones fail. The second concept is dual economy. According to the author, a unique dual economy has taken shape in Yakutia in the past three decades, during which the process of microadaptation also took place. As an eloquent example of economic duality, the author points out the different ethos of the horse-based versus the cattle-based economy. Whereas the cattle economy focuses on subsistence and remains embedded in the richly interwoven fabric of kin and residential relations, the horse economy is much more marketized and leads to the accumulation of capital.

As the argumentation is based on case studies from various field sites mostly from central Yakutia, it is difficult to see what generalizations could connect the particular ethnographies with the grand picture of Sakha arctic pastoralism. However, this is a minor problem overall. What I find problematic throughout the book is the lack of accuracy in using and analyzing oral and written sources; I also believe that in some cases, an inaccurate interpretation has misled the author in their arguments.

My major concerns lie in the inaccurate way of using oral sources, written sources, and local archival sources. First, though, there is a surprising number of misspelled and misinterpreted Sakha words in the book. Sometimes these mistakes do not change the meaning and are mere misspellings, such as the word "father" (42). In other cases, the interpretation of a word is not exactly correct, exemplified by the author's use of the word "uurangkhai" (29). In some cases, the interpretation is simply wrong. For example, the author writes about berry picking and mentions that Sakha people pick *kuulaakh oton* (translated as "cowberry") and *oton* (translated as "red cowberry") (87). In Sakha, there is no *kuulaakh oton*, only *uulaakh oton*, and this shrub is identical with *oton*. They are not two separate species. This is perhaps minor, but in other cases, unfortunately, misinterpretation may have led the author to unfounded conclusions.

In chapter 6, the author argues that the use of pasture lands and hayfields did not require a system of territorialized private ownership from Sakhas. However, ethnographic and historical literature shows

that the idea of ownership is more common among Sakhas than the book suggests. Historical sources are explicit about the way Sakhas perceived hayfields and regulated the question of land ownership; from the seventeenth century, we have several records from the representatives of the Muscovite state complaining that Sakha people manage hayfields as properties. Sakhas (according to the complaints) sell hayfields to each other “unlawfully,” because these hayfields all belong to the tsar. Not only the three-volume collection of seventeenth-century (Red. koll. 1970 *Materialy po istorii Jakutii XVII veka: dokumenty jasachnogo sbora: v 3-h ch.* Moskva: Nauka published in 1970 confirms this, but also V. N. Ivanov’s monograph on the socio-economic relations of Sakha people in the seventeenth century (Ivanov, V. N. 1964. *Sotsial’no-ekonomicheskie otnosheniia u iakutov. XVII. vek.* Jakustkoe Knizhnoe Izdatel’stvo).

The Sakha perception of hayfields as properties is also clear from prerevolutionary sources. Unfortunately, the author does not refer to the two most important publications on this topic. One of them is Leo Levental’s book on Sakha property relations (Levental’, L. G. 1929 *Podati povinnosti i zemlja u jakutov.* In Majnov I. I. (red.) *Materyaly po obychnomu pravu i obschestvennommu bytu jakutov.* Leningrad: Izdatel’stvo Akademii Nauk SSSR. 221–448. and Nikolai Vitashevskii’s publication Vitashevskii N. A. 1929 *Jakutkie materialy dlja razrabotki embriologii prava.* In Majnov I. I. (red.) *Materyaly po obychnomu pravu i obschestvennommu bytu jakutov.* Leningrad: Izdatel’stvo Akademii Nauk SSSR. 80–220. on Sakha law). Both of these authors, who each spent at least a decade in Yakutia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, reassure readers that the Sakha horse and (especially) cattle economies, as well as practices of landscape management, indeed needed the idea of private ownership and strictly regulated territoriality.

Finally, I noticed a lack of local archival sources. Nearly every village in Yakutia has a local museum, which usually contains a collection of local lineage legends, memories about the use of meadows, and records about collectivization and decollectivization, and so on. Certainly, these local sources vary in accuracy and scope but, in most cases, they can provide an invaluable contribution for understanding local adaptive processes. Other chapters (to varying degrees) suffer from the same deficiency. Some of the obvious mistakes could have been easily eliminated during the editorial process. For example, in the map showing the locations of the author’s fieldwork sites, the entire Churapcha region is incorporated into the neighboring Megino-Khangalassky region.

To sum up, if a book focuses on case studies and microadaptation, the reader should rightly expect that the field data is accurate. At the

same time, these minor issues do not hinder the reader from receiving a full and generalized picture of Sakha horse and cattle breeding. Besides Susan A. Crate's (Crate, Susan A. 2006 *Cows, Kin, and Globalization: An Ethnography of Sustainability*. Lanham: AltaMira Press) book on Sakha adaptation processes after decollectivization and the economic demise after perestroika (focusing on a single village community in Western Yakutia), Takakura's book provides the best picture available on Sakha cattle and horse husbandry.

It is apparent from the book that the author's decades-long fieldwork experience provides him with delicate insight in analyzing ethnographic data. This is obvious from chapters 7 and 8, in which it seems that the author feels more at home when discussing horse husbandry than the cattle-based economy. Beyond any doubt, besides Emilie Maj's doctoral dissertation on Sakha horses (Emilie Maj 2007 *Le cheval chez les Yakoutes chasseurs et éleveurs : de la monture à emblème culturel*. Ecole Pratique des HautesEtudes, Paris), Takakura's provides the most detailed description of Sakha horse-based economy. Finally, the author integrates Japanese anthropological literature on Yakutia and Russia into his analysis, and it is very instructive to have this unique perspective on the fall of the Soviet Union and the economic prospects of Russia.

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