

# The Continuity of the Traditional Livelihood of the Altai-Kizhi People in the Post-Soviet Period from the Perspective of Material Culture and Social Change

DANIEL DĚDOVSKÝ\*

**Kontinuita tradičních způsobů obživy Altai-Kiži v postsovětském období prizmatem materiální kultury a sociálních změn**

**Abstract:** The livelihood of the Altai-Kizhi people saw two paradigm shifts during the 1900s: forcible collectivization at the turn of the 1930s, and its impromptu deconstruction in the 1990s. This paper observes the changes to the livelihood of the Altai-Kizhi following the collapse of the USSR with a particular focus on the area of material culture and social change. It investigates the issue of continuity of traditional culture patterns in modern society and their importance. Particular attention is paid to the form and function of farming buildings in the context of climatic conditions in the South Siberian Mountains, the veneration of the horse hitching post, the aspect of agriculture, and the relationship of the Altaians to their livestock.

**Keywords:** livelihood; pastoralism; agriculture; social change; the Altai Republic

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## I. An Overview of the Livelihood of Southern Altaians before Russian Interventions and Changes Resulting from Forced Sedentarization of the Inhabitants

In the period preceding the forced sedentarization of the inhabitants, the system of the livelihood of the Southern Altaians was based on the specific semi-nomadic manner of the pastoral lifestyle involving prevalently livestock production. The basis of their diet was mutton, less frequently goat meat, and especially on festive occasions also horse meat; venison acquired by hunting played a less prominent role compared to the Northern Altaians. The primary purpose of cattle farming was production of milk. In the summer, while grazing on high-mountain pastures, the local breed of so-called mountain cattle produced approximately 8 litres of fatty milk per day [Cunow 1926: 533] – this was a staple food in the region. The Altaian semi-nomadic lifestyle was a transitional kind of lifestyle between shepherding and farming. Mountain meadows also served for haymaking, but the manner of harvesting was not extensive because hay was only used for feeding of babies of farm animals, exceptionally also for milk cows and mares [Tokarev 1936: 11], while the remaining livestock had to feed in the wild. The German botanist Carl Friedrich von Ledebour mentions the existence of farming as early as 1830, although it only played a complementary role in the livelihood of the Altaians. In the valley of the Katun river, on the Lower Chuya, and

\* PhDr. Daniel Dědovský, Ph.D., Department of Asian Studies, Faculty of Arts, Palacký University Olomouc. E-mail: daniel.dedovsky@upol.cz

in the valley of the Ulegumen (present-day Bolschoi Ilegumen; Большой Ильгумень – a left-bank tributary of the Katun, south of Onguday), von Ledebour met farmers who watered their small fields from small water canals fed from a dammed river, tilled them with shovels, and grew grains: summer rye, wheat, and especially barley [*von Ledebour 1830: 135*], which served as an ingredient for preparation of tea. As documented by the German natural scientist Peter Simon Pallas, tea from wild tea bushes, growing in the northern provinces of China, was imported in the form of distinctive tea bricks [*Pallas 1776: 180–181*]: tea leaves fermented in water were bound together with jelly made from the blood of sheep or cows [*Ritter 1833: 253*] and pressed into a particular shape. The prominent German anthropogeographer Carl Ritter even mentions the utilization of such tea bricks as a means of exchange in barter trade. The nutritious tea, consumed from large wooden bowls, was prepared in the Mongolian fashion in a large iron cauldron over a large open fire with a bit of salt, complemented with milk, a little fat, and ground dried barley [*von Ledebour 1830: 44–45*]. In areas with the Mongol cultural influence, this type of tea is consumed even today as are weak alcoholic beverages: fermented *kumys* made from mare milk and *arakh* – a spirit from sour cow milk that used to be consumed especially on ritual or ceremonial occasions. The preparation is also described in old literary sources. Distillation of *arakh* (*arr'ki* in Pallas's transcription) served, among other purposes, as a way of using surplus milk, but it was also a social event where neighbours from the wide area were invited. *Arakh* was usually a very weak spirit from single-distilled milk, but wealthy people exceptionally distilled it up to six times [*Pallas 1776: 134–136*], and some of such spirits were called specific names (*dang; arsa; khorza*; the fourth distillation did not receive any specific name, the fifth was called *shingza*, and the sixth *dingza*). *Arakh* was commonly consumed either warm or hot. Von Ledebour, who was served *arakh* in the valley of the Charysh river, mentions that the high season for production and drinking of *arakh* was June [*von Ledebour 1830: 98*], when herds were traditionally moved to summer high-mountain pastures. Based on data from field research interviews, the custom of drinking *arakh* during transhumance was maintained until the forced collectivization following the Russian civil war where organisation of the pasturing cycle was taken over by the Bolshevik state administration. Herds of individual Altai kins were integrated into gigantic state factory farms; the newly state-owned animals and pastures were, however, still cared for by experienced local herders, and this fact had a substantial influence on the continuity of certain traditional sociocultural structures within Altaian society.

The manner of Altaians' adaptation to recent technological and socio-cultural changes has numerous ethno-cultural specifics following organically from the native systems of livelihood. If we disregard older Russian settlements established around trading posts [*Hejzlarová 2014: 5*], the semi-nomadic life of the pastoral community of Altai-Kizhi was only restricted by the gradual state-induced sedentarization of inhabitants over the second quarter or 1900s [*Edokov 1987: 53*]; this is why rural settlements inhabited by ethnic Altaians are usually rather recent. The structure of a modern-day Altaian village, created in the period of the establishment of *sovkhoz* (large state farms), is therefore still based on the structure determined upon its establishment: it is still possible to find wooden buildings from the first five-year planning period of collectivization taking place in 1928–1932 [*Torushev 2009: 203*]. The settlements consist of enclosed farmsteads whose core comprises

a wooden house based on Russian folk architecture [Sheglova 1996: 94] complemented by a modern form of the original Altai winter dwelling (*ayil*) which is currently used especially as a summer kitchen, or less frequently as a life tenancy for old parents [Data from field research 2017].

Although the settlement structure created by Russians within forced sedentarization of Altaians is more similar to an agricultural Russian village, the institution of a farmstead with an enclosed flower or vegetable garden around the centrally situated house was adopted by many Altaians only formally. Although these farmsteads are not missing, even in cases of new settlements, they are more of a stereotypical reproduction because they usually fail to serve their indigenous function; they usually remain grassy areas unused until today – after all, the entire living complex is significantly adapted to the pastoral manner of livelihood.

## II. The Role of Agricultural Production and the Importance of Wild Plants in the Livelihood of Southern Altaians

In the pre-Soviet period, Altaian agriculture constituted a secondary, auxiliary component of livelihood [Baylagasov 2011: 249]; it was mainly focused on production of cereals (barley, wheat, oat, buckwheat, millet) used in the national cuisine (*talkan* porridge, flatbread, groats) [Torushev 2005: 96]. If a present-day farmstead includes a vegetable garden, the crops commonly grown are potatoes, less commonly carrots, beetroot, onions, white cabbage, and at times also early cauliflower. Concerning the climate conditions, the range of crops to be grown is significantly limited. Some inhabitants use wooden garden frames covered with plastic sheeting for warm-requiring plants; in such cases we may find zucchinis, cucumbers, tomatoes, and peppers; a rarity reported by an interviewee from Ust-Kan was melons being successfully grown here. The system of livelihood began to be more significantly agriculture-oriented as of the 1930s as a result of the already mentioned sedentarization of the inhabitants. Russians experimented with agriculture in the mountains, so as the interviewee from the village of Kurota reports, his own grandfather already ploughed and sowed, growing oats, barley, and even wheat, because the climate in the region used to be warmer up until the 1940s [Data from field research 2019]. Many of the agriculture experiments were a failure; the political leaders, however, only admitted poor results reluctantly. In the 1970s and 1980s, Altaians were ordered by the *sovkhoz* to plant potatoes for several years; in the unsuitable conditions of the Siberian Mountains, however, they usually froze before the harvest. At present, potatoes are more frequently grown in the Altai Krai, where the climate is milder, while in the mountains of the Altai Republic, people sometimes grow early varieties of potatoes for their own needs [Data from field research 2019]. In addition, they seed feed crops (clover and oats); these crops also frequently freeze and the yield is therefore smaller than in the neighbouring lowland areas. The fruits grown here include especially currant for home-made jams, [Data from field research 2019] although fruit trees and bushes are entirely missing in the majority of the gardens. A traditional form of obtaining fruits was collecting wild berries [Potapov 1951: 41] – a practice more intensive in the past, but rather rare at present. Some people go to mountain woods to collect *kyselica* (sorrel) for their own needs, as it is rich in vitamins, as well as wood garlic and cedar nuts; herbs for herbal teas are presently collected

only rarely, since they may be bought in the pharmacy [*Data from field research 2019*]. In rare cases, within larger settlements, people grow herbs in their own yard. Berries are collected in forests until the first autumn frost: they include wild currant and gooseberry, sea buckthorn, barberry, honeyberry, and cloudberry; Altaians also occasionally pick mushrooms – a practice some of them acquired from Russians, as with beekeeping (in the past, Altaians only collected honey from wild bees). An interviewee from Onguday also recalled collecting wild hops as a child, which was dried and used when baking bread instead of yeast. In her own words, she intends to grow her own hops because she is used to the taste of hops bread from her childhood. Hop yeast is known to be frequently used for bread baking around Middle Asia; in addition, it is also an ingredient for the production of home-made spirits [*Uherek – Valášková – Kužel 1999: 255*]. Up until the present, the Altaian cultural landscape therefore still corresponds to the system of mountain pasture farming with preserved elements of the nomadic lifestyle represented by periodical alternation of farming in high-mountain summer pastures and valley winter pastures. Habitual division of large territorial units, according to the pastures of the individual Altaian kinships (*söök*) [*Tokarev 1936: 14*], has been replaced with the cadastral system. The property rights of individuals, based loosely on the older habitual ownership system, were only included in the system after the collapse of the USSR. The awareness of the family's ownership of a particular territory (forests, pastures, and fields) is therefore passed on from one generation to another. People do not use any milestones or other landmarks; children work in the fields and pastures from an early age and learn where the borders of their territory are located [*Data from field research 2017*]. For this reason, even at present the agricultural produce of the Altai Republic is limited: growing crops is almost entirely restricted to private properties and the prevalent plants are feed crops, especially oats [*Zhdanova 2015: 39*]. Villages are organised into a system of centres and the local administration is led by the *Head of Farm Administration*, representing the mayor's office of the particular farming unit comprising several farmsteads. In the neighbouring flat Altai Krai, inhabited prevalently by ethnic Russians, the production of grain on vast fields has prevailed since the Soviet era, while commercial growing of vegetables is almost missing and their import is necessary.

### III. Characteristics of Southern Altaian Herding in the Post-Soviet Period

Around the perimeter of the individual village farmsteads, the fence is connected to a sauna-bathroom (Russian *banya*), which is usually followed by a row of farm buildings around the perimeter, including stalls with a separable corral, chicken coops, and separate corrals for horses and cattle; in case of newer houses, the bathroom is not part of the farmstead complex. The function of farm buildings depends directly on the system of livelihood: stalls serve for rearing of lambs, less frequently for rearing of calves during the chilly early spring, while in the summer they are usually empty and serve only for milk cows, and in winter they accommodate selected individual animals – cattle and the most valuable horses [*Data from field research 2018*]. They are wooden constructions situated in a row, with a dirt floor and a flat, slightly pitched roof made of planks or corrugated metal sheets, usually entirely open from the entry front side. The pitched roof serves for drying, as they are usually covered with a thick layer of cattle manure. In the summer,

nitrogen-requiring plants such as nettles grow from this soil. This cover layer serves two purposes: farmers cover the roof with manure in the autumn so that it serves as insulation in winter, but this is also one step in the production of bedding litter. Liquids are extracted from the manure in the freezing weather as they drain on the pitched roof. In the summer, farmers take the matter down and spread it so that it dries thoroughly. The result is a light but firm and impermeable matter used instead of breathable and permeable plant bedding litter. This type of bedding litter makes removing of fresh frozen manure easier in the Siberian winters: if hay was used, it would freeze to the ground, while here it freezes to this dry bedding litter instead and may be removed easily. In addition, it eliminates the risk that stalled animals could freeze to the ground [*Data from field research 2017*].

During the Soviet period, pig farming was widespread in the area; at present, it is significantly less frequent and has even entirely disappeared from some villages, as it has become economically unfavourable – it tends to appear in bigger settlements with larger families because these produce greater amounts of leftovers [*Data from field research 2019*], otherwise it is inconvenient. Prior to the collapse of *sovkhoz*, Altaian farmers used to obtain oats for feeding free of charge [*Data from field research 2017*], while at present they need to grow it themselves. This is why the most frequent type of livestock is sheep, followed by cows and goats. Some farming buildings have a fireplace with a chimney – these are stalls intended for spring rearing of lambs. In May, there is a period called *sakhman* [*Data from field research 2019*] when lambs are born; Altaians provide special care for them because there is still the possibility of heavy frost, so farmers make a fire in the old furnaces if necessary. If an ewe gives birth to multiple babies at the same time, she usually refuses to suckle the weaker lamb; the farmer then has to force the ewe to suckle such a lamb. An interviewee from Ust-Kan reported that she once encountered an ewe rejecting her lamb when she was at home alone, so she had to hold the ewe, tie her up and force her to suckle the baby. She had to repeat the procedure several times in order for the ewe to accept her lamb. If such a process is not successful, the farmer has to take the rejected lamb to be ‘adopted’ by a goat [*Data from field research 2019*]. From this perspective, the care for bovine is easier: cows are highly independent and give birth in the pasture without any human intervention. The farmer only needs to provide help in cases of first-time mothers, ill cows, or if the birth might be complicated (the calf is too big). In case of bad weather, young calves need to be protected; if they get wet from rain that is followed by freezing weather, they might die. Horses are completely independent; farmers do not care for them – they only check on the herd’s location from time to time. Horses and goats roam the mountains without any control, so when needed, the farmer has to seek them. For this reason, farmers place bells around the neck of dominant stallions to facilitate the search for a herd in the difficult mountain terrain.

Apart from a public dug well serving the entire village, the individual houses commonly have six-metre-deep driven wells with pumps providing water for both people and animals. To create such a well, a tipped water pipe is driven into the ground with a round or square iron weight that is alternately pulled up and dropped. If the pipe hits upon a stone, it is either pierced, or the well must be driven in a different place. At present, the pipe is usually driven into the ground with a pneumatic hammer. Above the ground, the pipe is subsequently connected to a manual pump serving as the main source of drinking water, despite the proximity of the river. The only farm animal stabled throughout

the year, except for increasingly rare pigs, is fowl, mostly chicken; even milk cows freely roam the pasture and daily return home on their own for milking [*Data from field research 2019*]. Concerning farm animals, the interviewee from Ust-Kan remarked that sheep and horses like freedom, while cows are attached to the farmer – they come home on their own, do not need to be looked after, and tend to not run away. The primarily pastoralism-oriented culture still does not regard dogs fully as pets; their role is rather that of a guard, and they are not allowed into *ayils*. This custom also applies to the house, while cats are allowed wherever they like. Other house pets are not very frequent in the agricultural areas of Altai, but as the interviewee remarks, people should treat animals like brothers, especially horses and dogs.

#### IV. The Horse Hitching Post *Chacky*: the Importance of the Tradition and Religious Faith in Modern-Day Altaian Society

There is a horse hitching post in front of every village house, called *chacky* in Altaian, *konovyaz* in Russian, or *konovyazka* as a diminutive. Apart from its practical function, this hitching post also serves as a symbol of the kin, and a manifestation of the owner's masculinity and prosperity. In addition, *chacky* also symbolizes the interconnection of three spheres of the shamanist world similarly to the world tree. In the pre-Soviet era, it was part of a wider sacred space located in front of every *ayil*; at present, the hitching post is the only remnant (as it resisted anti-religious attacks from the state thanks to its practical function). These days, the spiritual plane of *konovyaz* is strongly accepted especially by the religious minority of Burkhanists [*Kleshev 2004: 187*]. Prior to sedentarization of the inhabitants, *chacky* used to be placed in front of every *ayil*, a mobile home of nomads, as well as every permanent winter dwelling. It may also be found even today at summer mountain herder huts called *stayanka*, which replaced the mobile *ayil* following the collectivization. In rare cases, it is also placed independently at a convenient place near a road or on a pasture. Since sedentarization, Altaians place *chacky* in their farmstead; a modern permanent form of *ayil*, developed from the older forms of the traditional dwelling, is mostly located here as well. For practical reasons, *chacky* is always situated outside the enclosed yard, although the traditional layout is still preserved in general. *Chacky* is a post with hewn notches for tying ropes and a capital carved into one of two types: the most frequent is the acorn (phallic) shape, while another frequent shape is the fork shape. One very occasionally also encounters anthropomorphic or zoomorphic capitals (the top part is carved to depict the head of a person, a bird, or a horse) – this is, however, a recent invention related to the revitalization process that Altaian traditions encountered as a result of the opportunity to manifest a cultural identity following the collapse of the USSR. The *konovyaz* with a fork-shaped capital serves primarily for tying a young horse because manipulation with such a horse is easier if tied high to the capital, above the notches for adult horses. In case of *chacky* with the acorn capital, circular tying notches are located directly on the body of the post; their number symbolically corresponds to the number of animals the herder owns. In the past, Altaians used to derive a family's wealth from the number of horses owned, so the number of tying notches may serve even today as evidence of a farmer's wealth [*Data from field research 2018*]. A strong religious veneration of *konovyaz* has been preserved up until the present even

outside Burkhanism, as part of traditional shamanism. Although it is possible to have *chacky* made by a more skilful neighbour, the owner has to erect it himself while performing a simple ceremony, and the post cannot be subsequently moved to a different place [Kleshev 2004: 187]. According to the local beliefs, if the post is replaced, the particular person would be put at great risk of failure or bad luck, most often in the form of a human or horse disease resulting frequently in the loss of a horse. If an old *konovyazka* is no longer usable, the farmer must also dispose of it himself. When the old post rots, the owner cuts it as firewood; a new post, however, needs to be erected at the same place. Otherwise, the person would be exposed to the same misfortune as in the case of replacing the existing *chacky*: either disease, bad luck, or an injury. In the past, the procedure of erecting a new *chacky* always involved a ritual, and even today it is accompanied with a small ceremony performed by the family. The most important aspect at present is finding a suitable place for the post, so that it does not become an obstacle for instance for a car; concerning the taboo related to the replacement of *konovyaz*, its unsuitable location would cause discomfort to the user of a particular estate. This is often the case with older houses built before cars spread in the Altaian countryside, where *chacky* is placed inconveniently. It is nevertheless replaced rather rarely. Several years ago, despite a warning from others, a man from the village of Boochi near Onguday replaced a *konovyaz* as it stood in the way of his car. After some time, he fell ill and his neighbours believe that the disease was a lesson for his stubbornness [Data from field research 2017].

## V. The Sociocultural Importance of High-Mountain Pasturing

A special type of dwelling related to the mountain pasture farming system is *stayanka* – a temporary dwelling for herders. Summer *stayankas* built high in the mountains are used by herders only during the warm part of the year in Siberia – according to an interviewee from Boochi, this period begins in May and ends in October [Data from field research 2018]. The interviewee from the village of Kurota stated that herders work in *tyaylu* (summer pasture with facilities) from the end of May until the first snow, which usually falls shortly after haymaking time (September) [Data from field research 2019]. It is a simple wooden dwelling with one room and the average area of up to 10 square metres with a flat, slightly pitched roof with a chimney and a dirt floor. The only equipment usually includes an old stove, a table, a shelf for crockery and food, and plank beds situated at the walls with tools stored underneath. Other tools, including necessary weapons, are hung both inside and outside on the wooden walls. A *chacky* is always placed in front of the dwelling; since the majority of *stayankas* are located in a terrain that can only be reached on horseback. The complex of the summer *stayanka* is complemented by a cattle corral, made usually by intertwining found wood and coating it with red clay from mountain sites to prevent rotting; in case a place can be reached by car, corrals are made from planks and plots, usually coming from dismantled older constructions.

Herders usually stay here alone or with a family for several weeks, guarding sheep grazing on the high-mountain meadows up to the snow line, until their relatives come to take their turn. In the pre-Soviet period, the entire family used to live on the pasture in a mobile *ayil*. At present, however, the number of people present and the time of their stay at the summer *stayanka* differs based on the size of the family and their availability (many

Altaian women have a job these days) as well as the number of herds owned. An interviewee from Ust-Kan remarked that the men within a family, or a group of friends agree on the turn-taking at the *stayanka*; at present, there is usually a single person who stays for three to five days [Data from field research 2019]. Twenty years ago, the father of an interviewee from Ozernoye used to stay outdoors almost non-stop – in winter at the *stayanka*, in summer in taiga; he scarcely came home. These days, he is already retired and does not go to *stayankas*, but the family still has sheep, cows and goats. In the past, they used to even keep pigs, but the interviewee stated, in accordance with others, that they require a great deal of food and need to be fattened up, while cattle graze on their own and there is little need to feed them with purchased feedstuffs [Data from field research 2019]. In the Soviet times, Altaian highlanders used to make hay according to the norms within paid obligatory work brigades [Data from field research 2019]; at present, manual work has been replaced with machinery. A recent European innovation is autumn production of spiral-twisted round bales containing the whole dried plants of wheat and oats mixed with hay that may remain in the field or pasture and do not require being covered for storing. Herders use them for spring feeding of babies, less frequently even for adult animals in case of a harsh winter or for pregnant females. The shape of the bale prevents penetration of water, so the feedstuffs remain dry and feedable throughout the entire winter. Unlike silage production, which is economically inconvenient due to the harsh cold Siberia, feedstuffs in bales remain feedable thanks to the chilly and windy climate.

A wealthy farmer from the village of Elo also keeps pigs, chicken, turkey and maral deer; he owns three big *stayankas* acquired after the collapse of the USSR, where he spends his spare time. The number of *stayankas* corresponds to the number of farmer's sons, who take turns in guarding according to the amount of time they have and based on mutual agreement. Large-scale farmers often hire herders and only visit *stayankas* to check on them. A typical Altaian countryman, however, usually only owns smaller herds [Data from field research 2019]. Winter *stayankas*, in the form of full-fledged farmsteads, including a timbered house, frequently also an *ayil*, a necessary *konovyaz*, and corrals for cattle and horses are situated in lower mountain parts, not far from permanent settlements, and may be easily reached by off-road vehicles; in many cases, they also have access to electricity. In rare cases, smaller-scale farmers have winter *stayankas* in the form of the original winter *ayil*; here, the traditional equipment as well as habits related to the Altaian dwelling have been preserved. It is a solitary hexagonal logged dwelling with a plank roof, an open fire with a traditional tripod to hang a cauldron, and a smoke hole in the roof. It is equipped with several plank beds around the walls to put up a greater amount of people. In the pre-sedentarisation period, Altaian kins did not establish village settlements, and the permanent winter dwellings of the individual families were scattered several kilometres from each other. The herder's family used to live here throughout the winter, separated from the others, so even in this regard, the collectivization-induced settling of the population into villages meant a great shift in the social life of the inhabitants. A low, eastward-oriented, entrance forces the incomer to bow in the direction of the central fireplace, while behind it, there is a sacred area that cannot be entered by anyone. Winter *stayankas* are used even today for winter grazing of cattle and for seasonal work with animals (spring sheep shearing, cattle branding and sterilizing), and also throughout the year as a shelter for herders working outdoors. In the winter, farm animals roam

lower-altitude pastures close to winter *stayankas*; horses can dig up deep snow and reach grass, unlike sheep and goats – which is why they always follow the horse herds. At the turn of June, when the snow is thawing in the mountains, the herds set off for higher taiga pastures; cows are the first ones, followed by sheep after shearing (shearing only takes place once a year, at the end of May, due to cold climate) and sterilizing of selected lambs, while mares set off for the taiga on their own after foaling, similarly to goats, which are considered clever animals thanks to their independence, in contrast to sheep [*Data from field research 2019*]. Sheep are the only animal species that need to be driven to high-mountain taiga and watched over by a *chaban* (shepherd). An interviewee from the village of Kurota stated that in the past, driving the herds to the pasture used to be a social event; when his grandfather was a young man, men used to go from one *ayil* to another to gather, and women would warm up *arakh*. Everyone only drank one cup until lunch; it was not common to get drunk. They talked about work and cattle, as well as family and other social topics [*Data from field research 2019*].

## VI. Social Pathologies in the Altaian Countryside and the Traditional Manner of Resolution

Settling Altaians into closer communities in combination with the post-Soviet renewal of private ownership also brought about intensification of some socially pathological phenomena, especially cattle stealing; tackling such crimes works different compared to Europe. After the collapse of the USSR in the 1990s, the function of the elder called *zaisan* (from Chinese) was semi-officially re-established; apart from patronage and supervision in maintaining the ethno-cultural activities, this position also involves solving social problems and greater kin disputes including criminality [*Ivanova 2007: 135*]. In the past, the personality of the *zaisan* represented a social authority with official powers: von Ledebour describes a *zaisan*'s richly furnished dwelling situated near the river Tegagom (present-day Тыдтугем; Tydtugem, a tributary to the Chuya), including wooden figures of gods, plenty of silk fabrics and clothing and rare imports from China [*von Ledebour 1830: 93–96*]. At present, there are twelve *zaisans* in the Altai Republic, representing the individual *söoks*. *Zaisan* trials, however, take place only rarely (for instance in 1999 the *zaisan* of the Kipchak *söök* had to tackle a major theft of cattle in the Ongudai district) [*Ivanova 2007: 135*].

As for petty crimes within a small village where people know each other, the problem is solved internally. If one member of the community makes another one angry, neither party speaks about the issue in public; in contrast, even an unpopular person gets a wedding gift from neighbours and is helped when building a house (for instance, the neighbours dig a hole for the privy), and the mutual relationships gradually settle. In case of more serious crimes, such as theft, the victim does not speak about the thief in public either, even if the crime is not a secret. The police are therefore usually not called for, and the victim rectifies the situation in person [*Data from field research 2017*]. A neighbour of an interviewee from Boochi had a piglet; at night, he was sitting in his privy and heard the piglet oinking desperately – somebody was stealing it. He silently crept to the stall and shouted at the thief so hard that he almost died of fright. “Let the piglet free and come in the morning,” the man then ordered the thief. The thief came in the morning in

his own car. “We will go to Karakol,” the piglet’s owner ordered sternly. At the Karakol grocer’s, he ordered food, vodka, and various necessary supplies, and the thief had to pay for them and take his neighbour and the shopping back home. Whenever the neighbour needs something, he primarily asks the thief for help. Similarly, an interviewee from the village of Ozernoye states that a farmer either puts up with the theft of an animal, or deals with the theft on his own [*Data from field research 2019*]. According to an interviewee from the village of Elo in the Ondrugai district, animal breeders watch over their animals from a *stayanka*, but do not move around with them. In case of horse herds, the dominant stallion leads the herd and does not need humans; animals move freely, and theft is a rather rare phenomenon in the countryside. One interviewee reported his animals having got lost and they were found three months later by his neighbour somewhere in the neighbouring Ust-Kan district [*Data from field research 2019*]. In contrast to freely roaming horses, even adult sheep have their shepherds to watch over them and have their backs or legs painted so that they are easily recognizable with binoculars. As for horses and cows, spring branding of new animals is frequent. Sheep and goats are commonly only grazed on the farmer’s own property and their movement is observed, because the implementation of European-type private ownership results in the gradual disappearance of kin-based division of land into vast territorial units constituting summer and winter pastures, and Altaians presently tend to graze sheep on their own land, based on which parcels they own or have hired.

There is a greater danger than thieves – wolves; in the winter and spring, they can cause the loss of twenty to thirty animals. It is illegal to shoot wolves, but the herders often break the law; however, there is an ethnocultural hunter’s code of ethics, still closely connected to traditional religious patterns [*Turlunova 1998: 237*]. According to an interviewee from Elo, they never shoot wolves without a reason, and they are careful not to shoot a female with puppies. There are, however, many poachers who shoot at every living creature [*Ekeev – Ekeeva 2007: 130*]; the Chinese and Koreans use horns and other parts of wild animals as a cure, and poachers supply these to them with a great profit [*Vaysman 2013: 27*].

The absence of collective dispute tackling apparently results from the former way of life in small and scattered groups, and helps maintain the social balance within a sedentarized community. In greater settlements with a police station, the situation is already quite different. An interviewee from the district town-like settlement Ust-Kan (officially, the only place with the status of a town in the Altai Republic is Gorno-Altaysk) mentioned that if there is a suspected theft of a calf that has not yet been branded, some victims already report it at the local police station; in many cases, however, this serves as a tool of vengeance among enemy neighbours. She also reported a personal experience, where she and her family went to their farm to corral the cattle due to a rapid spring cold spell after a rain, and they found a calf not belonging to them at their herd. They took care of it, so that it would not freeze, and on the following day, the owner came – a problematic neighbour, followed by the police, accusing them of theft; he might have taken the calf to the neighbour’s herd himself [*Data from field research 2019*]. Even here, however, infrequent thefts of horses mostly result in a personal confrontation of two herders, where the accused farmer has to prove to the victim the ownership of the particular animal in dispute.

## VII. Recent Development of Traditional Livelihood Forms from the Perspective of Social Shifts

The utilization of farm animals has been adapted to the current form of the Russian market economy, but is significantly influenced by ethno-cultural specifics. Compared to the period preceding the collapse of the USSR, when all herds were owned by a *kolkhoz* or a *sovkhov*, there are increasing numbers of Altaians at present who make a living by pastoralism, and some individuals return to the elements of the pre-*kolkhoz* manner of farming [Data from field research 2019]. Pastoralism has even been taken up by numerous ethnic Russians, and the system of caring for herds is not all that different from that of Altaians. What is different, however, is the missing religious veneration of *chacky*, the dwellings and animals. According to an interviewee from Boochi, the fact that *sovkhovs* used to employ herders based on a state directive led to the conservation of a way of living that would otherwise have disappeared much earlier, had the development of the society taken place naturally. Immediately after the collapse of the USSR, as a result of the availability of new options for livelihood, the interest in traditional pastoralism among the young generation dropped dramatically; almost all men started to commute from villages to towns and larger settlements for work, and many even moved there. After some time, job opportunities in towns became limited and the stagnating wages for relatively demanding jobs resulted in the influx of people back to the countryside and a return to cattle farming. After this return to the traditional way of livelihood, some people began to better realize their Altaian identity, which is affected destructively in many respects by the town environment [Data from field research 2017].

While in the period of *sovkhov*, huge herds included up to 500 animals, at present such amounts of animals are not kept by Altaian farmers; every farmer only owns a number of animals he can accommodate and manage economically. Apart from a cattle tax, there are no limitations from the state as to keeping animals. Having paid the tax, farmers can trade their produce as they wish (some of them still avoid paying the tax) [Data from field research 2019]. Sheep are bred by private owners especially for meat that is sold to local meat-processing enterprises and also covers their own needs. Mutton still represents one of the basic foods for many people; before a farmer kills a sheep for his own needs, the family performs a small religious ceremony, and it is important that they subsequently consume the whole animal [Data from field research 2017]; even the hooves are used for preparing a jelly, or boiled together with the sheep's head and given to the dogs, similarly to other leftovers, so there is almost no waste, except for bones and possibly also horns. A certain hierarchy in dividing the food has also been preserved up until the present – the sheep's head is usually only eaten by the head of the family. In addition, there is a preserved taboo involving breaking the bones, especially the ribs – they must not be crushed, because that is where the animal's soul dwells; breaking an animal's bones could cause a greater misfortune to the farmer such as the great loss of cattle [Butanaev 2005: 110]. Smaller herds of goats also serve, apart from meat, as a source of fur achieved by grooming; the wool achieved from sheep is sold for production of felted boots and carpets [Data from field research 2019]. At present, the greatest purchaser of Altaian sheep wool are the Chinese. An interviewee from Boochi, who works as a private truckload carrier, stated that the trade line goes via Kazakhstan to China, and he himself carried wool along this route several

times. The neighbouring Mongolians order wool from Bashkiria, because its properties are more convenient for them, but they also purchase common wool from various regions of Russia including Altai, in order to clean it and sell it to China. Russians also purchase wool from farmers; it is subsequently processed to felt, which is later resold several times and ends up in China as well [*Data from field research 2019*].

## Conclusion

Despite repeated Soviet anti-religious measures, Altaians succeeded in preserving their food-related customs, custom patterns and the shamanist system of religious faith; their elements are even manifested in the recent material culture, adapted more or less to the modern era. There has been a paradigm shift in the change to the nature of ownership following the collapse of the USSR – one similar to that brought about by the disappearance of the ethno-cultural system of ownership induced by forced collectivization at the turn of the 1930s. The deconstruction of *sovkhoz* was accompanied by the disappearance of the established Soviet model of *sovkhoz* pastoralism, which the Altaian population had already adapted to. This process was also accompanied by a fast inclination to the Euro-Atlantic notion of ownership with market relations and new ways of livelihood. Some patterns of the traditional Altaian culture began to seem somewhat old-fashioned and their reproduction was shifted to the individual plane. If some herd owners are interested in returning to the pre-*kolkhoz* manner of pastoralism, this return is especially conditioned by personal financial circumstances and its rentability, as it is primarily a business intended to raise profit. In this regard, Altaians are particularly motivated by the strong demand for local products from the Chinese, which in many aspects outweighs the area's dependence on the Russian market. Concerning the fact that Altaian pastoralism implies a wider system of cultural values, it is an occupation to which people take a different and more personal attitude to, compared to other professions offered by the modern era, and this factor also significantly influences its viability.

Although the majority of people in the modern Altaian society also manifest their prestige in other ways than with the number of animals in their herd, and prefer to do so in similar ways to people from Western cultures, the efforts at revitalization, open practising and presentation of the Altaian cultural heritage is growing stronger in the region. The conditions enabled by post-Soviet permissiveness are also facilitated by an awareness of the fact that the culture is threatened by new technologies and the demand for a higher-quality lifestyle.

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### **Data from field research projects**

Interviewees anonymized at their own request (eighteen people) from the districts Onguday, Ust-Kan, Kosh-Agach, Ust-Koksa and Gorno-Altaysk.

*Daniel Dědovský is a graduate of Charles University in Prague, Institute of Ethnology. He specialises in branch history and methodology of ethnology. Since 2019, he works at Palacký University in Olomouc, where he studies Russian cultural influences on Middle-Asian cultures in the field of social and material culture.*