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DAILY LIFE DYNAMICS OF THE RURAL POPULATION OF
KALMYKIA (INTERDISCIPLINARY ANALYSIS)

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Abstract

Being a large agricultural Russian entity Kalmykia belongs to regions with a tense situation in the labor market, which is characterized by labor redundancy, lack of national investment resources for the introduction of new jobs; difficult financial situation of agricultural enterprises, low level of employment of the rural population. Rural territories of the steppe republic suffered from the negative consequences of agrarian reforms of the 1990s. As a result of the liquidation of large agricultural enterprises and the destruction of agricultural production the standard of living of the rural population was dramatically reduced, jobs disappeared, social infrastructure collapsed. Therefore, the rural population began to actively leave their native places, regardless of age, education, ethnicity and gender, to break away from their roots in search for the means of subsistence and material well-being. As a result of geographical movements, not only the social status that increases or decreases the position of the rural population changes, but primarily the consciousness and labor behavior of the Kalmyks. The life strategies of modern residents of the republic are primarily related to the prospects of work employment and upward mobility (high-quality education for children, career opportunities). Due to the increasing migration sentiment of most villagers, the number of people who know the characteristics of traditional types of employment of the Kalmyks decreases. The fundamental transformations of the Kalmyk village destroyed the usual way of life. The centuries-old everyday life of the Kalmyks, whose ancestors were nomads, is replaced with a rapidly modernizing reality.

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Keywords: Kalmykia, types of traditional employment, ethnic culture, cattle breeding, animal husbandry, personal subsidiary farms



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1. Introduction

For centuries the Kalmyks have been engaged in animal husbandry. In the Soviet period, the representatives of the steppe people proudly stated that every third suit in the country was sewn from the wool of the Kalmyk sheep. In terms of the number of sheep and the volume of wool, its quality, the Kalmyk region occupied a leading position in the Soviet Union. But with the collapse of the first socialist state, much has changed, including the attitude towards the important agricultural sector, livestock, which in this regard has lost its former position. Hence, the study of the daily life of the population, how it survives in a constantly changing reality, becomes especially relevant. As a result of the disappearance of previous standards of life, the emergence of new norms, and unsustainable situation causes concern among society and various social institutions. According to Ilyin (2010), “everyday life includes several elements that characterize its style: active labor activities that affect the outside world; recognition of the desirability of changing the world; inclusion of labor rhythms into cyclic time; full participation in everyday life of a person, etc.” (p. 38). This paper considers changes in traditional activities, the daily life of the modern Kalmyks.

2. Problem Statement

The processes of sociocultural evolution taking place from the beginning of the 1930s to the present have greatly influenced such ethnic groups as the Kalmyks, which were inherent in traditional culture. These changes are caused by globalization processes. On the one hand, they contribute to the integration of the ethnic group into technological modernization processes, the dissemination of innovative ideas, views, and the improvement of the life of the people. Positive consequences of these processes have certainly improved the life of the inhabitants of steppe regions. On the other hand, globalization is increasing the assimilation of national cultures, including traditional occupations of the ethnic community. For example, the number of people who own the original activities of the Kalmyks related to animal husbandry is decreasing.

When analyzing the category “everyday life” we use the definition given by Gorshkov (2009) that

everyday life is usual, repeated forms of a person, in which his urgent needs are realized. In scientific interpretation, it is understood as the process of the life of individuals, which is deployed in well-known situations on the basis of self-evident expectations.... Everyday life is contrasted as daily life to holidays; ... as life routine – to moments of acute psychological tension; as reality – to ideal. (p. 39)

The study of rural problems is very relevant because due to the deterioration of the demographic situation in the countryside, namely, the active migration of the rural population, its aging, the reluctance of the villagers to engage in low-skilled work, there may be some difficulties in implementing the programs that would ensure food security in the region, the country as a whole.

3. Research Questions

Innovations are actively introduced into today's reality. Science is designed to "fix the struggle and the combination of the old in the new and the new in the old, which happened both on the surface and, mainly, in the depths of the masses (Polyakov, 2000). The active introduction of the "history of everyday life" into social sciences takes place in the 2000s. According to Pushkareva (2004), "the focus of the history of everyday life is a comprehensive study of the way of life and its changes among the representatives of different social strata, their behavior and emotional reactions to life events" (p. 10). Vozmitel and Osadchaya (2009) specified the theoretical and methodological foundations of sociological analysis of everyday life and lifestyle. The authors formulated the features of a comparative study of the daily life of the Russian population. Well-known sociologists note that the systemic crisis led to a new social reality, in relation to which new scientific approaches to the analysis of important phenomena and processes should be developed. The latter include lifestyle. The "disappearance" of the Soviet way of life initiated the search for mechanisms of interaction between the society and the individual, as well as models describing these processes taking into account the active role of the individual in the formation and change of the way of life. To develop a new lifestyle concept, it is advisable to use a polyparadigm approach (Vozmitel & Osadchaya, 2009). Following the advice of experienced sociologists the author of the paper analyzes the social adaptation of the rural population to new living conditions, reveals changes in the lifestyle and labor activities of rural residents.

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to objectively consider social changes in the rural areas of the republic from the point of view of interdisciplinary analysis, to introduce the results of qualitative sociological studies (observation, interviewing) conducted by the author in the 2010s into scientific circulation.

5. Research Methods

The changes in the rural community, which were determined externally, prompted the author of the paper to focus on the visual method of study in sociology. Shtompka accurately noted that a "good sociological view" should practically not be turned off: "Understanding and using visual data becomes the necessary skill of everyone who is interested in social and cultural processes" (as cited in Khaly, 2018, p. 269). The interviews with residents of rural settlements (among them the heads of the service system, civil servants, public sector workers, pensioners, unemployed) allowed considering the variety of social phenomena (Namrueva, 2019). Observations and interviews formed the basis of the analysis of the changes of the labor activity of rural residents of modern Kalmykia. On the example of specific life situations the author considers socio-economic transformations in the traditional lifestyle of the steppe people.

6. Findings

In conditions of destruction of usual everyday life, social stability, the population is forced to quickly adapt to constantly changing reality. Let us consider how phenomena and objects of the outgoing everyday life combine and interact with radically new realities, the results of continuous transformations of life.

Thus, in the rural area of Kalmykia, new hybrid forms of the way of life of people are especially bizarre. For example, an animal breeder with a mobile phone and Internet access, satellite communications, riding a horse. A sheepman tending sheep in the steppe with the help of mobile communications agrees on the delivery of feed for winter. A pastoralist engaged in daily manual hard work in his farm hands over grown cattle to a meat processing plant with modern equipment. A milkmaid returns home after working on a farm where certain processes are automated and are manually controlled in the old fashion way on a personal farmstead. The housemates cut loose on social media platforms, communicate with friends from far abroad, listen to lectures by metropolitan professors. As we see, the surviving simple habits associated with purely patriarchal lifestyle, living in the countryside, are closely intertwined with technical innovations.

Despite difficult economic situation of many rural families, almost every one of them has cars, however, most of which are bought on credit. The residents of remote villages arrive to the steppe capital Elista two hours in advance to shop those goods that in past years they produced themselves (dairy, meat products).

Having received an agronomic or zootechnical education a rural resident stays in the city not willing to work in rural areas. Only a few work in the agricultural industry. Some villagers spend weekends in the city, visiting cinema, theater, supermarket, other entertainment establishments that are not available in the village. Once gas water supply was introduced, many rural residents of the republic improve their lives, their housing is comfortable: they now have plastic windows, split systems, satellite antennas, modern washing machines, toilets, shower cabins (Namrueva, 2019). Modern youth do not know how to harvest kizyak (pressed manure used by nomads as fuel). For the most part, the villagers do not know how to fire up a furnace. These once familiar actions were preserved only in those livestock parks where conditions for a comfortable life have not yet been created (no gas or electricity).

Often we have to face conflicting judgments regarding livestock work. Thus, in February 2020, in an interview with the author, one young man, a city dweller, argued that livestock work is cyclical, does not require constant physical strain. During the period of responsible campaigns, you have to work hard, and most of the time you can rest in the shadows, only occasionally looking into binoculars, thus controlling where the flock and herd are going. If necessary, an animal breeder will saddle his iron horse (a motorcycle or a car), go to sheep, cows, and bring them back to the right place.

Another interlocutor, a rural resident who helped his parents from early childhood, and later became a farmer himself, said that it is a hard job for all those who decided to connect their life with animal husbandry. In his opinion, regardless of the time of year, there is almost no possibility of rest, except for sleep. From morning until late at night, important work must be done: count animals, monitor their condition, drive them to the pasture, bring cows, separate calves, feed other animals (poultry, pigs, horses). The series of work in the cattle camp lot is endless.

The work of an animal breeder is hard, he lives and works in a steppe all year round, he is disconnected from the advances of civilization and human communication. In any inclement weather, in the rain, in the cold, in the heat, he goes out for his flock. Many experienced livestock farmers, and the young people who replace them, understand that sheep are the wealth of the Kalmyks transferred by ancestors, which should be transferred to descendants in safety. It is understood that with the disappearance of this type of work, the uniqueness of the ethnic group itself will also disappear.

According to Osmanov (2002), “the general tendency of modern culture towards unification, going from both cultural interactions and modernization, the industrial origin of many elements of culture, tools, their standardization, leads to an even greater destruction of specific ethnic properties” (p. 72). We became eyewitnesses of how the traditional activities of the Kalmyks, which are associated with cattle breeding, gradually disappear. Girls, young women for the most part stopped milking cows, men cannot cut an animal. Both cannot drive a horse, ride a horse. In our opinion, these labor skills are performed only by those who are somehow involved in a farm where domestic cattle are grown.

There are almost no people who know how to roll felt (the result of wool milling), install a kubitka (a portable dwelling of nomads). The traditional occupations of the Kalmyks were also cutting and sewing, but, unfortunately, oblivion awaits them. In a village, in everyday life, horse-drawn transport is very rarely used; shepherds, herdsmen mainly move on cars, motorcycles. Only true connoisseurs of horses, enthusiasts of horse racing keep and raise real tribal horses.

While in the past each Kalmyk woman was engaged in sewing (cutting, sewing, embroidery, etc.), currently a small number of women possess these skills. During a business trip in 2017, the author learned that in one of the district centers, women were forced to go to the neighboring district center to nip their coat and sew trousers underneath. In a large village there are no people who know how to do what each Kalmyk woman knew in previous times. Such a quality as the “special tendency to sewing,” noted by Bakaeva (2017), lagged behind the unification of clothes, strive for finished factory clothes. We see the same situation in production, life-supporting, socionormative and cognitive fields. It is enough to look at the modern dwelling, the food of modern villagers, which, losing their ethnic identity, have become standard and universal. Agricultural skills are gradually lost (care and maintenance of pets, primarily cows, sheep).

In many villages, livestock grazes uncontrollably near a village posing a certain threat to the nearest fields and a huge risk to highway traffic. The older generation has neither the strength nor the health of shepherding the village population, and those who are younger do not have the desire to become a shepherd. In those areas where they are successfully engaged in crop production, “unmanned technologies” began to be installed to avoid cattle breeding. An innovation in the form of an “electric shepherd” (metal wires under low electrical voltage) was observed in several areas that specialize in grain growing.

7. Conclusion

Modernization processes in the region have changed not only the external aspects of the life of the rural community (transition to a new type of production, increased comfort of living, etc.), but also led to changes in cultural, value and motivation spheres. The life of the Kalmyks has been greatly improved, but

this has been achieved at the cost of their gradual loss of their cultural identity and ethnic uniqueness. But self-identification with a stable, centuries-old developing ethnocultural community acts as support, protection, especially necessary in the context of social and cultural changes. We believe that the modernization of ethnic communities should take place without a radical change of socio-cultural foundations. There is the experience of Asia, which showed the world new opportunities for development without destroying its own culture, traditional labor activities and the loss of ethnic identity. The combination of technological progress preserving the elements of traditional ethnic culture that do not interfere with development should help to move forward.

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