

Evolution of Food and Economy among the Yakuts from the 17th Century to the Beginning of the 20th Century: A Comparison of Biological and Cultural Data

Situated at the interface of biology and the humanities, the anthropology of food is a privileged field for the study of ancient societies. Reconstructing the food of the past in all its complexity and diversity can only be achieved by combining the various available sources. Traditionally, the diet of past populations has been studied by historians (written sources) and archaeologists (material sources), but today the development of techniques of biological analysis on human samples offers new ways of tackling this issue.

We have chosen the case study of Yakutia, as the abundance of historical and ethnographic data provide a solid contextual framework, and tombs discovered in the permafrost allow access not only to artefacts and funeral meals, but also to very well preserved biological samples.

The study of the diet of the Yakuts, who are traditionally horse and cattle breeders, is part of European colonial history and therefore illustrates the transition from a traditional way of life to one dominated by a market economy, in a particular environment where the temperature can reach -71°C in winter. The territory of Yakutia, spread over three million square kilometers, includes various biotopes with valleys and lakes rich in pastures in Central Yakutia and Viluy, and mountainous regions in the North less favourable for breeding, where hunting has always remained an important food source.

Our objective is to reconstruct the evolution of the Yakut diet, and to determine its regional particularities as well as those of its social (as determined by artefacts found in the tombs) and sexual categories. To achieve these objectives, we compared data from several sources:

1. The synthesis of historical sources, documents of Russian administration -- some of them unpublished --, as well as ethnographic descriptions from the 17th century to the beginning of the 20th century, which attest that the diet of the Yakuts was mainly based on the products of horse and cattle breeding, while hunting, fishing, and gathering served as a source of supplementary food, in a variable way depending on the region. They attest to the diversity of dairy products and the consumption of various plants. A profound transformation of society after the arrival of the Russians is due to the sedentarization of the Yakuts, with the development of cattle breeding and a decline in the number of horses. Trade also introduced new products. Finally, the agriculture instituted by the Russians gradually replaced the gathering and preparation of the cambium of trees, used until then as flour.

2. The study of archaeological artefacts (food remains, dishes and smoking accessories), deposited in more than 150 tombs during the period extending from the 15th century to the beginning of the 19th century, highlights the important role of food offerings (meat and dairy products) in funeral rites prior to mass Christianization in the 19th century.

3. The analysis of stable isotopes of carbon and nitrogen on the bone collagen of 61 buried subjects and 19 fauna samples (including 11 archaeological and 8 modern) distinguishes meat and fish consumption. It reveals differences of diet by geographic region, and a stable diet among the wealthier Yakuts.

4. Research on substances resulting from the degradation of toxic products in the hair of 47 buried subjects attests to the occasional consumption of tea and tobacco by Yakuts from the end of the 17th century.

The interdisciplinary approach in this study has allowed us to produce new data and to suggest a different point of view on the evolution of food among the Yakuts. Through food practices, we better understand the functioning of postcolonial society and the adaptation of the local population to new environmental challenges. In this sense, we consider food as revealing of its time.