POST-SOVIET CHANGE IN A YAKUTIAN FARM VILLAGE

We dedicate this article to Professor Dr. Eckart Ehlers, on the happy occasion of his 60th birthday.

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Summary: The authors conducted a field-based case study of Djarkhan, a farm village in the Russian republic of Sakha/Yakutia, in eastern Siberia, focusing upon the changes in land use, demography, settlement morphology, traditional culture, and living standards that have occurred since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Djarkhan is remote, isolated, and ethnic. Its climate is severe, and in every sense the village belongs to the "marginal lands" of Siberia.

In only six years, Djarkhan has witnessed the death of its sovkhoz, the rise and fall of a peasant cooperative, the demise of all commercial agriculture and reversion to private subsistence farming, an increase and subsequent major decrease of its population, severance of all bus and airplane links to the outside world, re-emergence of a class-based society, revival of extended family power, and increased availability of diverse consumer goods, among other changes. The villagers retain a deep attachment to place and pride in ethnic culture.

The future of Djarkhan and similar villages remains uncertain. A diversified adaptive strategy, most elements of which are already in place, could allow it and similar places to survive the profound changes presently underway.

Profound changes came to Russia in the wake of political liberalization, the disintegration of the Soviet Union, and the collapse of communism. These changes rather quickly penetrated into rural areas, reaching even peripheral ethnic republics such as Sakha/Yakutia in northeastern Siberia (Fig. 1). Within that republic the changes transformed rural life by revising landuse systems, restructuring settlement morphology, and modifying the socioeconomic order. A resurgence of ethnic culture added another dimension of change. These transformations are part of an ongoing process with uncertain final results.

We present here a case study of change in one village in Sakha/Yakutia, a place representative of many. Such case studies at the village level remain almost nonexistent for post-Soviet Russia, and particularly for Siberia (Prosterman & Hansstad 1993, 149-189; Toffe & Nefedova 1997). Rural change has been analyzed mainly at the regional and national levels, lacking the geographical perspective gained from in-depth local field research (O'Brien et al. 1992; Kraus & Liebowitz 1996). Insights gained from our particular farm village – marginal in location, extreme in climate, and ethnic in population – help illustrate what is happening in isolated regions and republics of the Russian Federation and suggest where these changes may lead. Our field research was carried out in 1996 and 1997.

1 Djarkhan village, Sakha

Our case study village, Djarkhan (also known by its older name, Arylakh) lies on an interfluve within a broad bend of the River Vilyui, a major left-bank tributary of the great Lena, in a far corner of the Central Yakut Plain, the traditional heartland of the Turkic-speaking Yakut people. The village belongs to the administrative district, or ulus, of Suntar, the seat of
which is a town of 9,000 inhabitants also called Suntar. Flanked by expansive plateaus, Djarkhan occupies a lowland site some 213 meters above sea level. Its location is both remote and peripheral, at the end of a dirt track, on the very outermost margins of the agricultural world, at 62°20' north latitude, in the midst of the boreal forest (Figs. 1, 2) (Informatsiya 1989).

The village lies some 13 degrees of longitude west of the republic's capital, Yakutsk, at 116°41' east longitude. To reach Yakutsk from Djarkhan by road requires a drive of 1,072 kilometers over unpaved routes, long stretches of which are passable only in winter. Just to reach Suntar town, one must drive 90 kilometers on unpaved roads and tracks, and even it is isolated. While Suntar lies on the banks of the Vilyui, the river route to Yakutsk has no regular or reliable passenger boat service. Airline connections, expensive by any standards, are available from Suntar's dirt landing strip to Yakutsk and a few other places.

Isolation is not Djarkhan's only problem. The local climate, classified as “dry microthermal,” exhibits extreme continentality, with a frost-free period varying from 50 to 85 days. In winter the thermometer can fall as low as –58°C; and the entire region is underlain by thick permafrost (Agroklimaticheskiye 1973, 7-9; WEIN 1991, 196).

Djarkhan consists of a loose cluster of log houses, scattered through a gridiron street pattern, and is home to over 600 people (Fig. 3). The villagers are almost all ethnic Yakuts, the titular group in Sakha/Yakutia. While a farm village, Djarkhan also has a school complex, a council hall, a sawmill, several shops, an infirmary, and a few other service facilities. Most notably, perhaps, the village is a place caught up by profound changes, as a comparison of Figures 3 and 4 reveals.

2 Village history

Recent changes cannot be addressed without some understanding of the trajectory of settlement history.
Die Vilyui Bend Region im westlichen Sacha/Jakutien, sowjetische und postsowjetische Landauflteilung

Djarkhan is not an ancient, immutable Asian village with origins going back to prehistoric times. On the contrary, it is largely a phenomenon of the Soviet era, and the village was founded in 1932, during Stalin’s collectivization of agriculture. Over the subsequent decades, the villagers obeyed diverse Soviet production directives, while enjoying services and subsidies provided by the government.

At the same time, Djarkhan perpetuated many centuries-old Yakut rural ways. Its site on the shores of fish-rich Oybon Lake, at the edge of a series of interconnected, grassy, thermo-karstic depressions, or alahses, has been occupied by Yakut cattle and horse breeders at least since the 1600s (Wein 1997, 123). A census taken of the district in 1860 revealed a Yakut herding hamlet on Oybon’s shore, consisting of six wooden huts and 39 inhabitants. A few kilometers away, beside Lake Arylakh (or Ebe), stood a larger settlement, with 19 huts and 127 people (MAAK 1994, 53-56, 516).

Soviet reorganization of the rural settlement pattern caused several such native lakeside hamlets to be drawn together into the more sizable village of Djarkhan, where the government could impose administrative control and central planning. The concentration of the rural population also made possible provision of schools, transport facilities, medical services, and eventually such amenities as electric power. By 1939 the village had 71 houses and 292 inhabitants. In almost every subsequent decade, settlement consolidation continued. Smaller collective farming villages proved uneconomical, and many were abandoned. Djarkhan grew in such a manner, by absorbing the population of nearby smaller villages, as well as by natural increase, enhanced by the new medical services and improved sanitation. In the late 1960s alone, in a major wave of village consolidation, Djarkhan grew from 380 to 541 inhabitants. By the close of the Soviet era, in 1991, the village had 197 households and 671 inhabitants, nearly all of whom lived in their own private homes (Demograficheskiye dannye 1993–1993, 1984–1997).

As the village grew in population, it went through a series of changes in its organizational structure. In the 1930s, nine collective farms, or kolkhozy were established in the vicinity, including “Budyonny” at Djarkhan. These proved too small to be economical, and consolidation left only two surviving kolkhozy by 1951. By the end of the 1950s the large, 7-village “Lenin” kolkhoz had been created, incorporating Djarkhan and most other villages in the Vilyui River bend. Restructuring into state farms, in the middle 1960s established the 6-village “Toybokhskiy” sovkhoz. Djarkhan and its lands formed a peripheral part of this state farm, subsidiary to the larger village of Toybokhoy, some 30 kilometers by road to the south (Wein 1991, 194; Atlas Sel’skogo 1989, 55, 55; Ekspli- katsiya 1996; Arkhivy 1932–1997; Pakhomov 1997a).

Prior to the creation of the sovkhoz, times had been hard in Djarkhan. Subsidies and commodity prices remained low. Salaries rose significantly in the late 1960s, when the Soviet government substantially increased its investment in agriculture, and villages were no longer bled to support industrialization. State price subsidies for agricultural commodities rose 17-fold between 1965 and 1989, and Djarkhan, as a favored “marginal land” village, received extra subsidies. If the place ever enjoyed a golden age, it was then (Bater 1996, 199–191; Arkhivy 1993–1997).

Even in the kolkhoz decades the accomplishments of the village’s farmers were often impressive. Ordered by Stalin’s decree to grow grain, Djarkhan’s farmers had placed 113 hectares of dark-soiled grassland under cultivation by 1940 and later sent sheaves of their boreal wheat to a great exposition in Moscow. Grain cultivation persisted into the 1960s, though yields remained low. In 1963, a good year, the harvest from Djarkhan’s grain fields amounted to only 8.2 centners per hectare. In 1940, 2 hectares of potatoes were also cultivated, all presumably in kitchen gardens (Demograficheskiye dannye 1993–1983).
Local farmers also continued the ancestral Yakut enterprises of raising horses and cattle and harvesting large amounts of hay. In 1941 the village had 508 cattle, 70 percent of which were privately owned; 165 horses, 75 percent belonging to the collective and used principally as a source of meat; and 21 reindeer. By the end of the Soviet period, Djarkhan villagers possessed 530 cattle and 862 horses, as well as 65 pigs and 38 poultry. Bovine dairy products became the local specialty. A milk-processing plant operated in the village, and samples were flown regularly to a Suntar laboratory for testing (Demograficheskiye dannye 1936–1983, 1984–1997).

Over the decades, Djarkhan developed an impressive service economy. The village, at the close of the Soviet era, had schools through the tenth grade; a post office; a store selling food, clothing, and other supplies; a bakery; fuel depot; community hall and clinic. As early as 1942, the village had 36 persons employed by the state in various service capacities, mainly teachers, and this contingent grew over the years to reach 90 by the late 1980s, all supported by state funding (Demograficheskiye dannye 1936–1983, 1984–1997).

3 Post-Soviet demographic changes

The village of Djarkhan well represents post-Soviet Russia's demographic instability (DEMKO 1998). Its population has fluctuated disconcertingly since 1991. Initially, the village grew, as it absorbed contingents of native pensioners and jobless persons from the cities of Sakha (PAKHOMOV 1995, 59). By 1993 Djarkhan had increased to 721 inhabitants. Since then, the migration flow has reversed, and by 1997 the village retained a population of only 635, a decline of 12 percent in only four years and 5.4 percent just since 1996 (Demograficheskiye dannye 1984–1997).
Clearly, Djarkhan has begun to experience, belatedly, the net emigration from rural areas that has characterized Sakha/Yakutia for at least a decade. In the republic as a whole, rural areas experienced a net loss of 107 persons per 10,000 population in the period 1989 to 1994, and rural emigration has intensified in subsequent years. By 1997, about 10 empty dwellings could be detected in Djarkhan (Demograficheskii ezhegodnik 1995, 430; Ivanov 1997). Births continue to outnumber deaths in the village, but the vigorous natural increase evident as recently as 1994 has ended. Births fell from a high of 21 in 1993 to only 7 by 1995 (Demograficheskiye dannye 1984–1997).

Preponderantly, it is the younger people who leave, seeking greater economic opportunity in cities such as Mirny and Yakutsk (Fig. 1). Young women emigrate in greater numbers than men, and the population of Djarkhan in 1997 was 53.2 percent male. The number of weddings fell from 12 in 1992 to only one in 1995. As a consequence, Djarkhan’s population is increasingly elderly (Photo 1). Pensioners, which include all men over the age of 55 and women over 50, grew in number from 105 in 1988 to 170 in 1997 (Demograficheskiye dannye 1984–1997).

Still, the village remains full of children. Kindergarten and school enrollment stood at 290 in 1997, almost one-third of Djarkhan’s population, a legacy of very high birthrates in the 1980s. Near the end of that decade, fully 19 percent of the inhabitants were under the age of 7, and Djarkhan well reflected Sakha’s high

Fig. 4: Plan of post-Soviet Djarkhan, 1997. A new school complex has been built and the state farm complex has fallen into ruins, among other changes. Most new houses were built with subsidies from the Republic.

Source: on-site observation
rural total fertility rate (TFR) of 3.210 for 1990. While the rural TFR for the republic declined to 3.028 by 1994, the most recent year for which data have been released, this still reflected vigorous natural population growth (Demograficheskiye dannye 1984-1997; Demograftcheskiy Ezhegodnik 1995, 87). Throngs of well-behaved teenagers “hang out” in front of the village council hall during the “white nights” of summer.

4 Agricultural changes

The demographic turmoil in Sakha is rooted largely in agrarian change, including the abolition of the state farm system, as required by recent Russian laws, and the shift to a market economy. The “Law of the Peasant Farm” in 1990 encouraged privately-owned agricultural enterprises, and Yeltsin’s 1991 decree demanded that all farmland be converted within several years to some form of peasant ownership. Sowkhozy such as the one encompassing Djarkhan could become privately-owned cooperatives, joint-stock companies, partnerships, associations of separate peasant farms, or fully independent individual family enterprises. All government ownership of state farms ended (CRAUMER 1994, 333–334, 342; BATER 1996, 177, 203–208). In the Sakha Republic as a whole by January 1994, 97 percent of the sowkhozy and kolkhozy had been restructured to end state ownership and control (CRAUMER 1994, 333, 345).

Djarkhan’s villagers participated in these events. Sowkhoz “Toybokhoyskiy” disbanded in 1993, and each of its constituent villages went its own way. The people of Djarkhan harbor resentment against the farmers of Toybokhoy village, who, they claim, seized more than their fair share of the sowkhoz livestock in the breakup.

By contrast, the drawing of borders between the various villages went amicably. Surveyors were still at work delineating Djarkhan’s lands in 1997, but it was clear that the village would receive essentially its traditional territory, which stretches largely northward from the settlement (Fig. 2) (IVANOV 1997; YAKOVLEV 1997).

A locally-owned village cooperative at once replaced the state farm in Djarkhan, retaining much of the local administrative structure of the deposed system. Initially, 135 villagers joined the cooperative, which assumed ownership of most of the machinery, livestock, and milk processing facilities that had belonged to the local division of the sowkhoz. The cooperative retained also the traditional specialization in bovine dairy products (Zapisi 1993–1997).

The Djarkhan cooperative failed within a few years, in part because government subsidies decreased. In late Soviet times, the sowkhoz had received not only regular agricultural subsidies, but also extra funds because of its location in agriculturally marginal lands. By contrast, Djarkhan’s post-Soviet subsidies do not exceed those given to villages in the environs of Yakutsk, which enjoy good access to market (PAKHOMOV 1997 b). The post-Soviet subsidies, amounting to 2.2 new rubles per kilo of milk, proved inadequate to sustain commercial dairying. In fact, the milk subsidy payments often failed to reach Djarkhan (IVANOV 1997).

Another of the problems the cooperative faced was lack of sufficient milk-processing capability and the absence of cold storage facilities. In July weather, the peak of the milking season, preserving milk became impossible. When we interviewed the cooperative leader in 1996, he complained that much of the milk spoiled every day (MYREYEV 1996). The poor condition of the cooperative dairy was clearly evident in that year at the summer herding camp called Tyattir, a settlement of three log dwellings built around a courtyard. A large, decaying shed nearby housed two lethargic attendants using machines to milk 30 cows. The milk had to be
transported daily to the processing plant in Djarkhan, about five kilometers away, but only horse-drawn wagons were available for the purpose. The modern age had slipped away at Tyattir. It had been abandoned by 1997.

Earlier in the 1990s, the Swedish government had built a milk-processing factory at Krestyakh, not too far west of Djarkhan, to convert milk into a durable fluid in cardboard containers (Fig 2). Djarkhan’s milk could conceivably have reached this factory, but the workers at Krestyakh proved unable to cope with the sophisticated machinery and technology. The plant closed, and with it probably any hope for commercial dairying in the Vilyui bend region (IVANOV 1997).

Similarly, local beef production could not be made competitive in the market economy. Beef subsidies also proved inadequate and unreliable. The cost to produce a kilogram of beef in the Djarkhan cooperative in 1996 was about 23 new rubles, while beef subsidies amounted to only 2.07 new rubles per kg, and the going price of beef at stores in the republic could not by law exceed 7 new rubles per kg (IVANOV 1997).

Djarkhan’s remote location also contributed to the failure in marketing beef, just as it had in the demise of commercial dairying. The opening in 1997 of a beef-processing plant in Toybokhoy, 30 kilometers distant, came too late to rescue Djarkhan’s commercial meat production (PAKHOMOV 1997b). In that same year the cooperative dispersed its 60 remaining cattle to private ownership among its members and went completely out of the milk and beef businesses (IVANOV 1997).

Part of the cooperative’s difficulties also stemmed from the steady withdrawal of the more ambitious and diligent workers, who became frustrated with the inability of the leadership and members to adjust to new conditions. Too much of the old Soviet mentality persisted in the cooperative, combined with a lack of entrepreneurial expertise. Membership fell to 42 by 1996, and to 30 by 1997, leaving behind mainly a hardcore residue of “slackers” and heavy drinkers. Those who withdrew took with them much of the livestock, as well as the right to use certain parcels of land (IVANOV 1997).

The rump cooperative shifted entirely to horseflesh production, based on a herd that numbered 549 in 1991; down by 244, or 28 percent, from the 1991 sovkhoz herd (Demograficheskiye dannye 1984—1997). Because the hardy Yakutian horses require little winter feed, foraging for themselves in the coldest conditions, the cooperative also reduced hay production. The members do not even selectively castrate stallions, leaving breeding to Darwinian dictates (SIVTSEV 1997). In spite of the labor-intensive nature of the restructured enterprise, horse raising has proven economically marginal. Dietary preferences differ ethnically, and horseflesh can only be marketed among Yakuts. The large, dominantly Russian mining city of Mirny, west of Djarkhan, offers no outlet (Fig. 1). Only the Yakut-populated administrative seat, Suntar, serves as a market. However, the dealers there who contracted for Djarkhan’s horsemeat often failed to pay after delivery was made. Another factor that worked to the disadvantage of the cooperative is that the horseflesh production is highly seasonal. In the absence of a meat processing and storage plant, villagers have to wait until early November, when the temperatures fall below freezing, to start operations at the village’s slaughter shed. This period extends until mid-March (IVANOV 1997).

These problems led to bankruptcy. As of mid-1996, the cooperative’s debts, owed mainly to a bank in Suntar, stood at just over one million new rubles, including 318,000 new rubles previously spent on cattle feed. At that same time, the cooperative had 242,000 new rubles in uncollected debts owed to it, mainly by meat dealers, leaving an operating deficit of nearly 800,000 new rubles, which can never be recovered. By 1997, the debts had mounted. In addition, the cooperative owed millions of new rubles to Sakha’s government to repay long-term loans. The situation in Djarkhan was typical for Sakha, where extremely high levels of debt, among the highest in all of Russia, characterize socialized farming units (IOFFE a. NEFELOVA 1997, 165; ZAPISI 1993–1997; SIVTSEV 1997). The Russian federal budget offers no chance for relief, because it recently stipulated a 39 percent cut in allocations for agriculture (Premier 1997, 48). All commercial marketing of produce has apparently now ceased at Djarkhan.

Striking visual evidence of the demise of both the sovkhoz and the cooperative can be found in the utter ruin of the huge, elongated barns that once dominated the state farm complex in the eastern end of Djarkhan (Photo 2). These formerly housed the dairy herds...
during the long winter and contained storage for the huge amounts of hay required to carry the cattle through the seven-month winter. The ruins cast a depressing pall of decay over the entire settlement.

Similarly, Djarkhan’s farm machinery has deteriorated. In 1988 the villagers had 14 tractors, four large trucks, and six mowers, but difficulty obtaining replacement parts, coupled with high prices for fuel, caused a profound decline in the use of machinery. The 1997 village possessed only four remaining tractors, and the cooperative cannot afford a new motor for one of these. In the village streets traditional horse-drawn wagons now rival the tractor (Mashinno-traktorny 1988–1997; IVANOV 1997).

5 Private farms

A few of those who withdrew from the cooperative established independent peasant farms, as allowed under post-Soviet legislation. In the Republic, more than 2,700 such farms had been established by the end of 1993, averaging 42 hectares in size (CRAUMER 1994, 333, 345). Only two of those independent peasant farms exist in Djarkhan (PAKOMOV 1997b; IVANOV 1997). Of these, the most successful is the Vladimir Kondratiev farm, operated by a man in his early sixties (Photo 3). Kondratiev left the cooperative in 1993 and claimed a piece of good-quality grassland northeast of the village at an alahs called Alexei-Maara. He took an interest-free government loan for the purchase of a tractor and other needed items, and now operates a livestock farm with 50 cattle, including 20 milk cows. Kondratiev produces a substantial hay crop to feed his herd. He markets beef largely through barter at Suntar. The government owes him subsidies but has so far not paid. Even so, the farm supports 20 members of the extended Kondratiev family, which includes 10 adults. The family lives on the farm year round in several large log houses, avoids purchasing items at the village store, and produces much of its own food (KONDRATIEV 1996). The chances for long-term success remain in question, though according to official statistics only 3.5 percent of peasant farms in Sakha failed in the period 1992 to 1993 (CRAUMER 1994, 333). In any case, Kondratiev is an old man by local standards, having already surpassed the average male lifespan.

The second private farm, named “Development”, is operated by the interrelated Potapov and Simyonov families, working together. They claimed lands in the Soppon Alahs, site of the pre-Soviet hamlet where their ancestors once lived (IVANOV 1997). This extended family, consisting of two households, built traditional palisaded Yakut dwellings, which they recently insulated for year-round residence, as well as barns and sheds. They, too, specialize in cattle raising. Their
enterprise is guarded by vicious dogs, who make any approach to the farmstead hazardous.

Interestingly, nobody in Djarkhan challenges the right of these people to reclaim the lands owned by their pre-Revolutionary ancestors. Remarkably, the knowledge concerning who owned which alahses survived six decades of Soviet control, from collectivization in the 1930s to the present day.

6 Subsistence

The remaining, far larger part of Djarkhan’s agricultural population has reverted to part-time subsistence farming. These villagers now own most of the local cattle, which total at least 897, a surprising increase of 69 percent in numbers since 1991 (Demograficheskiye dannye 1984–1997). Most families possess several milk cows, continuing a tradition that survived intact through Soviet times. In summer the animals drift largely without supervision from pastures near the village during daytime to the streets at night, where dung fires are lit to protect them from insect swarms. Hay cut from surrounding meadows provides winter fodder, and some families reside during the having season in camps at a distance from the village. In the autumn many of the fattened cattle are slaughtered for beef. During the cold months, from September to April, the remaining cows, heifers, bulls, and calves are housed in small barns of traditional design, located on each farmstead (Photo 4). These villagers also own at least 72 horses, some of which are work animals, and it now seems probable that the cooperative’s horse herd will also be distributed to private ownership. Because privately-held livestock are taxed, the villagers underreport their numbers, so that the actual totals may be as much as 40 percent higher than reported in the annual censuses. Poultry and swine are also found in some farmsteads, but these animals are never kept through the winter. Rabbit-raising on a modest scale began in Djarkhan in 1994, but they, too, are slaughtered before cold weather sets in (Demograficheskiye dannye 1984–1997; IVANOV 1997).

Kitchen gardens, both in the open air and in greenhouses, form another component of subsistence farming in Djarkhan, yielding mainly potatoes, cucumbers, tomatoes, and radishes. Occasionally one finds unexpected exotic vegetables such as chili peppers. These private gardens represent a survival from Soviet times.

Together, all such private subsistence enterprises provide a substantial part of Djarkhan’s food supply. In fact, 12 of these farmers, who were among those who withdrew from the village cooperative and represented the harder-working, more ambitious element, formed their own, rival cooperative. This allows them to acquire subsidies and equipment they could not claim as individuals. Still, they do not market their produce—largely beef, milk and butter—outside the village (IVANOV 1997).

The village does not and will not survive on subsistence farming alone. Djarkhan today relies heavily upon nonagricultural government funds, including wages and pensions. Each month in 1997, about 90,000 new rubles were paid to the people of Djarkhan as pensions and welfare stipends. An additional 70,000 new rubles was due monthly as salaries for the village’s 114 service sector employees, but these funds have been arriving late. Altogether, 313 of the village’s residents, almost precisely half of the total population, receive government payments. These funds allow the village to survive (IVANOV 1997; Demograficheskiye dannye 1984–1997).

7 Living standard

The economic troubles of the village have been accompanied by changes in the standard of living, though by no means has the trend been universally downward. One of the best indices is provided by health standards. The entire Sakha Republic was characterized in 1996 as having a “poor state of population health” (MALKHAZOVA 1997, 11). Doctors in Suntar report that health conditions in the administrative district have deteriorated since 1990, due in part to spreading malnutrition and vitamin deficiencies (PETROV 1997). The infant mortality rate in rural areas of the Sakha Republic rose from 21.1 per thousand in 1990 to 24.9 in 1994, and in the same period life expectancy dropped from 65.9 to 63.3 years. Male life expectancy in rural Sakha fell to only 58.2 years by the latter date (Demograficheskiy Ezhegodnik 1995, 98, 234). By 1996 medicines were no longer available at Djarkhan’s infirmary and had to be purchased instead in Suntar, with patients bearing the expense. A new pharmacy and infirmary, manned by one doctor and a paramedic, opened in the village in 1997, remedying part of the problem, and a new hospital was established at nearby Toybokhoy. Moreover, Djarkhan’s residents now have access to a medical evacuation helicopter, which can transport the sick to the larger, better-equipped hospital at Suntar (IVANOV 1997).

In general, however, the transport links between Djarkhan and the outside world have seriously deteriorated. In Soviet times, small propeller-driven airplanes offered one or two inexpensive flights weekly from the village to Suntar, but these bush pilot connections have been discontinued, due to the high price of aviation fuel and removal of a supporting subsidy. Djarkhan’s dirt airstrip has vanished beneath pasture grasses, and the airplane now stands “mothballed” at the Suntar airport.

Similarly, all bus service to Djarkhan has recently been terminated. To reach Suntar or even Toybokhoy today, one must own a motor vehicle or hitch a ride from someone who does. The first 15 kilometers of the
In Djarkhan, motor vehicle ownership is a post-Soviet phenomenon and is confined to a small number of villagers. This man's jeep is his pride and joy. The mixture of alatok grassland and boreal forest is typical of the area.

Photo: T. G. JORDAN-BYCHKOV (10.7.1997)

In Djarkhan, the automobile is a post-Soviet phenomenon and is confined to a small number of villagers. This man's jeep is his pride and joy. The mixture of alatok grassland and boreal forest is typical of the area.

Photo: T. G. JORDAN-BYCHKOV (10.7.1997)

In Djarkhan, motor vehicle ownership is a post-Soviet phenomenon and is confined to a small number of villagers. This man's jeep is his pride and joy. The mixture of alatok grassland and boreal forest is typical of the area.

Photo: T. G. JORDAN-BYCHKOV (10.7.1997)
especially along the Vilyui. In Djarkhan, one woman healer – a white, or benign, shaman – plies this trade today.

Linguistically, the village has become almost entirely Yakut-speaking. In the population of Djarkhan in 1997, only three of the 635 residents were not Yakut, including only one Russian. Thus Yakuts now form 99.53 percent of the village population (Demograficheskiye dannye 1984–1997). The Russian language is hardly ever heard in the streets and homes of Djarkhan, and many inhabitants are functional monoglot. At the entrance to the school, a placard in Yakut greets the pupils, and the few Russian signs, as at the store, have peeling paint and date from Soviet times. The flag of Sakha flies alone above the village Council Hall.

Interest in genealogy and pride in one’s ancestry, suppressed in the Soviet era, have revived. Djarkhan’s extended Tikhonov family provides a good example. Members do not hesitate to tell outsiders that “ours was once a rich family,” and a venerable tricolor Tikhonov clan chief’s sash, hidden for seven decades, is once again displayed with pride. The family claims descent from a runaway Russian exile, Seluyan Tikhonov, who married a local Yakut woman in the late seventeenth century, and started the clan. A shrine commemorating the family’s origin was recently erected near a small grove outside the village. Every summer the extended family gathers there for a celebration.

The greatest Yakut folk festival, Tsyakh, held around midsummer’s in June, is also experiencing a revival. Soviet authorities had restricted the festival to a few days and obliged every village to hold the event on the same week in an attempt to diminish the overt ethnicity of Tsyakh and the substantial inroads it makes on the rural work schedule. Now the dates have been staggered, allowing itinerant musicians and athletes to perform at multiple celebrations, in the ancient manner. Celebrants, too, can now attend more than one Tsyakh each summer.

9 Djarkhan’s future: abandonment?

Given these diverse changes, can Djarkhan and scores of other isolated villages in the marginal lands of Russian survive? Three scenarios seem possible, and one of these is clearly abandonment (Ioffe a. NEFEDOVA 1997, 125–128). Today, in some parts of Siberia, “villages dissolve into ghost towns of the elderly and immobile,” and even along the Lena River, in the heart of Sakha, recently abandoned settlements can be seen (BROWNSON 1993, 77; WESTCOTT 1997, 27). Large parts of rural Russia could become a “demographic desert” (Ioffe a. NEFEDOVA 1997, 280). The best and brightest young villagers continue to leave Djarkhan, and even the head of the village council fears that the place will be nearly dead within 10 to 25 years unless circumstances change (IVANOV 1997; PAKHOMOV 1997b).

Some very high governmental ministers in Sakha favor supporting only those villages close to Yakutsk, where commercial agriculture has a good chance of profitability. One such minister, who grew up in rural Sakha, wants to abandon all agriculture and draw the rural population into cities and towns, rather than having his people “live as in the times of Ghengis Khan” (ARTAMONOVA 1997). While some experts speak of “sustainable development” in the Russian Arctic lands, Djarkhan and many other villages face a more basic task – achieving “sustainable habitation” (VIDIC et al. 1996, 249–266). Clearly, a “chaotic and unknown” future awaits those who live beside Lake Oybon, and the settlement could perish (BROWNSON 1995, 77). The judgment of history could well be that Djarkhan, a Soviet creation, did not long survive the demise of the system that gave it birth.

Village abandonment, in fact, became a well-established trend in Soviet times. A 1974 decree ordered the “liquidation of unpromising villages,” but in fact the process was decades older than that (DENISOVA 1995, 2–3). Indeed Djarkhan owes its creation and subsequent growth largely to settlement consolidation. For example, nearly all of the 160 inhabitants of Kuosan, a village 7 kilometers to the east were relocated to Djarkhan between 1966 and 1980. Villages died in many parts of Russia in late Soviet times (Demograficheskiye dannye 1936–1983; DENISOVA 1995, 97). The failure of commercial agriculture strongly suggests that Djarkhan, in its turn, has now also become an “unpromising” village.

Abandonment is the easy and perhaps logical prediction to make for Djarkhan and similar villages. Undoubtedly, it is the prediction political economists would choose. To the cultural geographer, however, the issue is not so simple. Djarkhan is more complicated than sterile economics. Spiritualism, emotions, and ethnicity must also be considered, as well as alternative economic strategies.

10 The Future: economic viability?

Djarkhan could survive as an economically viable settlement, making its way in the market economy. The head of the village council feels that, in order to survive, the village must develop some commercially viable enterprise, and he regards agriculture as an unlikely candidate. He mentioned a sawmill as a possibility, enlarging the present facility which produces lumber only for local consumption. Commercial-quality timber grows abundantly in the forests around Djarkhan. However, nearby Toybokhoy already has a sawmill, and another, much larger operation recently failed in the town of Santar. The village head man is pessimistic. He knows that Djarkhan’s chief attributes are high-
quality pastures and meadows, underlain by fertile black soils, which best suit it for the very agricultural enterprises that are no longer viable (IVANOV 1997).

Small-scale cottage industries offer some hope. Small-scale souvenir manufacture was underway in 1997, and the traditional Yakut talent for woodworking and jewelry-making could conceivably provide a basis for future cottage industries. On a less skilled level, one villager now collects manure and sells it to gardeners in the city of Mirny. Small-scale retail capitalism has also made a beginning. One resident, who spends the winter in Moscow, imports clothing to Djarkhan for sale in his shop. Others bring gasoline in canisters from Suntar. Retailing, of course, can thrive only if the villagers have money to make purchases (IVANOV 1997). One might imagine that fur trapping in the extensive village lands stretching northward from Djarkhan could provide a viable industry (Fig. 2). That is unfortunately not the case. Large commercial fur farms, located in northern Sakha, already flood the market with an oversupply of pelts, and these furrs from the colder areas are of higher quality (PAKHOMOV 1997b).

Cognizant of the fact that traditional Yakut culture resides in the villages, the government of the republic could use its mineral revenues to subsidize places like Djarkhan, much as is done in Norway. One high governmental official warned, however, not to count on such funding. More plausible is a quasi-touristic economy. Most people who emigrate from Djarkhan retain ownership of their house and lot, returning seasonally for summer vacation and eventually for permanent residence upon retirement. In this scenario, then, Djarkhan survives as a village of dachas and pensioners. A permanent resident population would be required to provide services for these people, and almost everyone agrees that the schools must be kept open if Djarkhan is to survive (PAKHOMOV 1997b). Where "there is a school, there is a future" (DENISOVA 1995, 92).

The villagers, both resident and absent, exhibit a strong attachment to place. They enthusiastically sing a song extolling Djarkhan's virtues at festive occasions. We should never, as geographers, underestimate the power of loyalty to place or, as Yi-fu Tuan called it, topophilia (TUAN 1974). The heartfelt cry, "don't vanish, my village," defies sterile economics and must be taken seriously by those who wish to prognosticate (Photo 6) (DENISOVA 1995, 155).

11 A neotraditionalistic future?

The emerging body of theoretical literature on neotraditionalism suggests another possible scenario for the future of Djarkhan (PIKA a. PROKHOROV 1994). Many of the "little peoples" of Arctic Russia seem to be reverting to their traditional subsistence way of life, as if Russian culture and Marxism-Leninism had never been imposed on them (VITEBSKY 1989; SLEZKINE 1994). The question is whether the Yakuts would revert to a pre-Russian way of life. Yakuts are emphatically not among the "little peoples". They number 400,000 and have thrived during the nearly four centuries of Russian rule, trading and mixing with their rulers while vigorously retaining their ethnic identity.

This ethnic factor must not be overlooked in predicting Djarkhan's future. When villagers migrate to the cities of Sakha/Yakutia, they make not only a rural-to-urban transition, but also enter an alien world of Russian culture. Cities such as Yakutsk or Mirny are essentially Russian places. Small wonder that the displaced villagers often return to the village, either seasonally or permanently. Their deep attachment to Djarkhan is bound up in ethnic identity and pride.

But could such an ethnic group revert to the ancestral "talsh economy" of horse and cattle seminomadism, dispersing back to lake-side hamlets and subsisting from their herds, hunting, fishing, and gathering (PAKHOMOV 1995, 18)? That seems highly improbable, if for no other reason because even rural Yakuts have forgotten how to live that way. In any case, the pastoral Yakuts of old often suffered hunger and deprivation, and one would not wish that way of life upon a modern people. Nor would Yakuts accept such a standard of living.

More likely is that many elements of the older subsistence economy could be incorporated into a more diverse way of life, which also included cottage industries, government salaries and pensions, and perhaps modest subsidies. One could envision, for example, a school teacher whose family also kept milk cows, mowed hay, fished in the lake, hunted in the forest, gathered wild berries, and gardened in a small greenhouse. In fact, many such families already exist in Djarkhan today. This, then, could be the future of the village - a diversified adaptive strategy that is at once
References

Demograficheskiye dannye sela Djarkhan (1936–1983): Local annual manuscript village censuses, in the Suntar Ulus archives, Suntar, Sakha.