

Trafficking of Women in 17th-Century Eastern Siberia

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Abstract

This chapter examines the trafficking of women in 17th-century Eastern Siberia, focusing on the Yakutsk region during Russia's early expansion. Using unpublished petitions for baptism, court interrogations, and other archival sources, it reconstructs how Yakut women were sold by male relatives, captured during military raids, or sought protection by joining Russian settlers. It explores the overlap between Yakut marriage customs, such as *kaly*m (bride price), and colonial practices, where servicemen and traders engaged in illegal yet tolerated exchanges. The study demonstrates that women were transferred for money, livestock, and goods. By applying the modern concept of human trafficking, the chapter reveals how women's ambiguous legal and social status blurred the boundaries between marriage, slavery, and dependency, thereby offering new insights into gendered coercion in early modern Siberia and contributing to broader debates on colonial labour regimes.

Keywords: Yakutsk; Siberia; Russian colonisation; human trafficking; slavery; women; bride price; 17th century.

The Muscovite state began expanding east in the second half of the 16th century. Colonisation of the huge territories of Siberia was rapid. In pursuit of furs, Russian troops, fur traders, and trappers moved from one river basin to another, reaching the Lena River as early as the 1630s. This area was inhabited by many different local peoples, including the Yakut, Tungus, Dolgan, and Yukaghir. In 1632 Lensky fort was founded. Throughout the 17th century, it stood as one of the most remote Russian settlements in Siberia. Over time, it transformed into the central hub of the new region and was subsequently renamed Yakutsk.

Most of the Russians who came to Siberia were male. It was unusual for military personnel and fur traders to bring their wives with them from Moscow to Siberia. This gender imbalance resulted in local trafficking in women. In surviving historical documents from the 17th century, numerous accounts shed light on the practice of local people selling their female relatives to Russians. Notable Russian pioneers, whose names are commemorated in the names of Siberian cities and

geographical landmarks, are known to have purchased local women. In 1642, renowned Russian explorer Yerofey Khabarov, after whom the city of Khabarovsk is named, purchased a Yakut woman from Fidor Balagur. Balagur received a mare as payment for the woman. Subsequently, Yerofey Khabarov sought permission from Russian authorities to baptise the woman.¹ Another noteworthy figure, Semyon Dezhnev, who navigated the Bering Strait 80 years before Vitus Bering, was married to a Yakut woman named Abakanda Syuchy.²

In this chapter I will examine who the local women sold to Russians were, and why they were sold. Furthermore, I will address the prices Russian men paid for local women, and explore the techniques of trafficking in local women in the Yakutsk region.

The issue of slavery in a colonial context has been studied since the 1970s. It has developed a profound historiographic tradition and remains a current research topic.³ Recently, the research focus has shifted from the Atlantic slave trade to Asian slavery, and slavery studies have become more regional.⁴ Studies of slavery cover various aspects and subtopics, with one of the most important for this chapter being the issue of female slavery and the experiences of enslaved women.⁵

In the context of Russian history, the research focus was traditionally on serfdom, and it was Richard Hellie who first started to study the issue of slavery in premodern and imperial Russia.⁶ He also reflected on Russian female slavery.⁷ The issue of slavery and various forms of dependency in Russia has become a research topic in the context of imperial studies in recent scholarly literature.⁸ However, most research focuses on the European part of Russia and its borders with the Ottoman Empire, while Siberia remains on the periphery of scholarly interest. This chapter is an early attempt to fill this historiographic gap and add another region to the map of early modern slavery.

¹ Archive of Saint-Petersburg Institute of History of the Russian Academy of Sciences (Arch. St.-P. IH RAS). Fund. 160. Inventory 1. File 28, f. 1.

² Bakhrushin and Tokarev, *Yakutia v 17 veke*, p. 408; Arch. St.-P. IH RAS. Fund. 160. Inventory 1. File 39, f. 6.

³ The entire bibliography of slavery, including 25,000 scholarly works across all academic disciplines and in all Western European languages published since 1900, can be found online at: <http://www2.vcdh.virginia.edu/bib/index.php> Last accessed on 16.05.2024.

⁴ Hägerdal, *Lords of the Land*; Allen, *European Slave Trading in the Indian Ocean*; Rossum, *Global Slavery, Local Bondage?* pp. 693–727.

⁵ White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?*; Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*; McLaurin, *Celia: A Slave*; Bush, *Slave Women in Caribbean Society*; Wright, *Strategies of Slaves and Women*.

⁶ Hellie, *Slavery in Russia*.

⁷ Hellie, 'Sex and power', pp. 83–95.

⁸ Khodarkovsky, *Russia's Steppe Frontier*; Stanziani, *After Oriental Despotism*; Witzentrath, *The Russian Empire, Slaving and Liberation*.

Human trafficking is a relatively new concept, but it has been successfully utilised in contemporary scholarly literature. For instance, Christopher Paoella, in his study of slavery, sexual exploitation, and prostitution in Northern Europe, the Mediterranean, and the Eurasian Steppe from late antiquity to the early modern period, applies this concept. He argues that the concept 'human trafficking' has advantages over 'slavery' because it has an internationally accepted definition.⁹ This definition was elaborated by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) in 2000: 'Trafficking in persons' shall mean the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs.'¹⁰ Paoella claims that this definition can be successfully applied to premodern contexts. Moreover, he underlines that the concept of slavery does not fully incorporate the concept of human trafficking because victims of trafficking were not necessarily legally recognised as slaves in their societies.¹¹

I find these ideas very useful for examining women trafficking in 17th-century Eastern Siberia. The social status of local women who lived with Russian settlers 'as wives' was barely legally defined. Shifting the focus from slavery as a social institution to trafficking would shed new light on the dynamics of relationships between Russians and Indigenous people.

Russian officials produced a vast amount of documentation: every quarrel, order, investigation, and official request was meticulously recorded. The Yakutsk office generated and preserved a multitude of documents that offer valuable insights into the history of Siberia, including its colonisation, administrative practices, and the interactions between Russian trappers, fur traders, and military personnel and the local populations.

The archive of the Yakutsk office has survived in relatively good condition, and its history has been known since the third decade of the 19th century. In the 1830s, an official named I. S. Selsky conducted statistical research on the Irkutsk province.

⁹ Paoella, *Human Trafficking in Medieval Europe*, p. 12.

¹⁰ Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime; online at <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/protocol-prevent-suppress-and-punish-trafficking-persons> Last accessed on 13.05.2024.

¹¹ Paoella, *Human Trafficking in Medieval Europe*, p. 12.

In 1839, he travelled to Yakutsk to study documents held in the Yakutsk archive. Selsky discovered that the documents from the 17th and 18th centuries were housed in a dilapidated building with a leaky roof. Concerned about the potential damage to these valuable historical documents, he reported the situation to the governor-general of Eastern Siberia, Wilhelm Rupert. Selsky highlighted the risk of mold and decay due to poor storage conditions. Subsequently, Wilhelm Rupert initiated correspondence with the Archaeographic Commission, an institution established in St. Petersburg in 1834 for the collection and publication of historical and ethnographic materials. As a result, the most precious historical documents from the 17th and 18th centuries in Yakutsk were sent to St. Petersburg between 1840 and 1846, while the rest stayed in Yakutsk until the 1860s, when they were transferred to Moscow.

The documents that were transferred to The Archaeographic Commission in St. Petersburg are currently stored in the Scientific and Historical Archive of the Saint Petersburg Institute of History at the Russian Academy of Sciences, renowned as one of Russia's most precious collections of historical documents. This chapter is primarily based on unpublished archival sources from this archive: 60 petitions for baptism dated between 1641 and 1643 were used.¹² These petitions were submitted by Russian servicemen, fur traders, trappers, and by the Indigenous people themselves appealing to the Russian tsar for permission to baptise local women and children. These documents provide valuable insights into the life stories of the local women who made the decision to undergo baptism or to have their children baptised. Within these accounts, they share details about the circumstances of their enslavement, the prices paid for them, and various aspects of their personal lives.

1. Was trafficking legal?

Not only were Russian fur traders and trappers involved in trafficking local women, but military personnel, whose primary responsibilities included military service and the collection of fur taxes from the local population, also engaged in the practice. Moreover, Russian servicemen bought local women from fur traders, trappers, and other servicemen, married and cohabited with them, and from these unions, children were born. Central authorities prohibited Russian servicemen from taking part in any commercial transactions with the locals.¹³ However, the Russian authorities found it difficult to enforce these prohibitions in practice. Despite trafficking and other interactions with locals contradicting the duties of

¹² Arch. St.-P. IH RAS. Fund 160. Inventory 1. Files 20, 28, 43, 67, 183.

¹³ Gurvich, *Etnicheskaya istoriya Severo-Vostoka Sibiri*, p. 57.

servicemen, Russian administrators displayed tolerance towards the ways in which military personnel sought to enrich themselves. In challenging situations where Russian military personnel might go unpaid for extended periods, administrators had to strike a delicate balance between the obligation to collect fur taxes and the need to maintain control over an armed group of individuals. Local administrators were aware that their garrison had the potential to riot at any moment. Given these circumstances, administrators likely preferred to avoid any unnecessary conflicts with military personnel and therefore turned a blind eye to the illegal activities their subordinates took part in, such as the fur trade and trafficking in women.

We do not know the true number of Indigenous women living inside the fort, or the ratio of local women to Russian men in the fort, but we can make an educated estimate. Four hundred servicemen arrived with the first governors in Yakutsk fort in 1638. After that, Russian local authorities sent frequent complaints to Moscow asking for more people to help colonise the region.¹⁴ But even in 1676, the garrison still consisted of only 531 people, although there should have been at least 644.¹⁵

The local Russian administration regularly sent servicemen to very remote regions to collect fur tribute, as well as to serve in other forts. Consequently, a serviceman needed to be mobile and ready for relocation. Before leaving the fort, servicemen settled their private affairs. They decided what to do with their property, livestock, Indigenous women, and children: they could sell them, arrange for someone else to care for them, or, in the case of women, baptise them so they could marry and take them to their new assignment.

A list of military personnel in possession of Indigenous wives, children, and slaves from 1641 includes servicemen who were to be replaced for the next year.¹⁶ This document is titled 'A list of slaves belonging to different kinds of people whose wives are to be baptised' and includes 64 names of Russian servicemen who had 68 'Yakut wives' living with them. It also contains notes on whether these women and their children should be sold, released or baptised into Orthodoxy. Conversion usually meant that a serviceman intended to marry his local woman. Thus, according to a single surviving document, 68 local women were recorded as living in the fort in 1641. Given that these women resided with servicemen who were subject to rotation, it is likely that additional local women also lived in the fort. Moreover, some Russian men preferred that their local woman remained with her relatives even after they had bought her; only visiting her from time to time. Thus, in the early 1640s, at least 64 of approximately 400 Russian servicemen lived with local women inside the fort, amounting to sixteen percent.

¹⁴ Ivanov, *Pis'mennye istochniki*, p. 61.

¹⁵ Bahrushin, *Nauchnye trudy*, p. 28.

¹⁶ Arch. St.-P. IH RAS. Fund. 160. Inventory 1. File 39, ff. 3–6.

Russian servicemen acquired these local women through various means. Although it was illegal for servicemen to buy women from locals, they often did so, and more frequently, they purchased them from other Russians.

Tensions between the fort's administration and servicemen or even trappers due to Indigenous women arose when Russians left the fort without permission. Living in a nomadic camp ('in the yurt') with locals was considered a misdemeanour. The Russian fort and the local communities were strictly separated, and administrators attempted to control the border. Each time Russians left the fort, they had to submit an official document asking for permission to leave and explaining the reason behind their trip. This was obligatory not only for military personnel, who were not free to move, but also for fur hunters, who had fewer obligations to the state.

A court case from 1646 concerns the illegal trafficking of a Yakut girl.¹⁷ A local prince, Lagui, went to the Russian court to complain about a fugitive slave girl, Agii, who also turned out to be his wife's sister. Agii ran away from the prince because he wanted to marry her off to a candidate she did not like. She stayed with two Yakut men for a while before they sold her to some Russians. The prince claimed that the transaction was invalid because the Yakuts did not own the girl they sold. During the investigation, several other crimes were uncovered. Two Russian men were involved in the transaction – fur hunter Agafon and serviceman Parfen Grigoriev. They had been allowed to leave Yakutsk fort to go fishing nearby. Both the local prince Lagui and Agii testified that Agafon bought the girl. However, it appeared that the real customer was Parfen Grigoriev. The Russians knew that purchasing Agii was illegal, so Parfen Grigoriev, being a serviceman, had asked fur hunter Agafon to make the transaction for him.

Parfen Grigoriev lived with the girl for some time but then gave her to Agafon and Agii ran away again. This angered Grigoriev and he forced Agafon to go to the locals to find Agii and bring her back. Agafon did not want to go to the locals and in the end, he paid a Yakut acquaintance to bring the girl back. The fort's administration sentenced Agafon to whipping for participation in a dubious transaction and for going to the locals to get the girl without permission.

The Russian administration tried to control any contacts between locals and Russians, regardless of social status. For Russian military personnel, all commercial relations with locals were illegal, including trafficking in women and fur trade. Despite this, they still participated in such practices. Moreover, fur traders and trappers, who were not legally forbidden from engaging in trafficking women, had to follow certain rules. The transaction had to be fair, meaning that a dependent woman must be sold by her male relative willingly for a price that he deemed

¹⁷ Ibid. File 142, ff. 30–35.

fair. Presumably, this scheme of trafficking was set up long before the arrival of Russians and was rooted in local traditions.

2. The bride price (*kalym*): the local marriage traditions

The Yakut people practiced the custom of buying their wives, known as *kalym* or '*kurum*' in the Yakutian language, well before the Russians came to the region.¹⁸ Yakut men typically paid for brides with cattle, and the number of cattle offered as *kalym* depended on the wealth of the bride's and groom's families. Interestingly, *kalym* did not exclude the provision of a dowry, the value of which was often correlated with the amount of *kalym*. In other words, marriage was an exchange between the families of the bride and groom, but the bride's family typically received more in return. In historical documents, the term 'price' (*tsena*) was frequently employed to denote *kalym*.¹⁹

In Yakut society, women possessed a low social status. Their marriages were treated as transactions, and women were viewed as commodities that could be bought, sold, or used to settle debts. Women with small children appeared to be unwanted by male relatives, presumably because they were no longer able to work as before and needed to care for their children. A vivid example of this situation is a court case from 1645/46 involving Yakut individuals Tohtogoy and his father-in-law Kecha. Tohtogoy claimed that his wife had fled to her father. In response, Kecha argued that Tohtogoy was severely beating his daughter, and when she sought refuge with him, he gave her to another person to settle his debts. Ultimately, Tohtogoy stated that he no longer desired his wife as she had left him while pregnant ('*potomu chto de ushla ta baba ot nego Tohtogoya bryuhata*'), but he requested compensation from his father-in-law for the period of time his wife had stayed with her father.²⁰

A similar situation, in which a female relative of the Yakut was perceived as property, is evident in the lawsuit concerning the Yakut girl Agii mentioned in the previous subchapter. During various interrogations, it turned out that Agii was Lagui's wife's sister. She had lived with Lagui since she was seven years old. Lagui claimed that he had raised her and that she was his slave ('*kholopka*').²¹ As a result, Lagui received compensation of two mares from the fort's administration for the girl.

¹⁸ Tokarev, *Obshchestvennyj stroj yakutov*, pp. 60–63.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Arch. St.-P. IH RAS. Fund 160. Inventory 1. File 142, f. 30.

From these observations, it is evident that women held a low status in Yakut society. The custom of selling and purchasing women, irrespective of their marital status, was deeply ingrained in Yakut traditions. The husband possessed rights over his wife, who was not free to leave him even in the face of abuse. Furthermore, if a husband no longer wished to live with his wife, he had the authority to sell her. Similar rights were held by the fathers and other male relatives of Yakut women. This prevalent practice likely contributed to the widespread trafficking of women between the Yakut people and Russians, eventually becoming a standard part of trade relations.

3. How did Russians obtain local women?

There were three ways to acquire women in Eastern Siberia. The first was as the outcome of military expeditions, sometimes referred to as '*pogroms*' in the documents. When Russian troops attacked local settlements or nomadic camps and emerged victorious, they would seize women, children, and cattle as spoils of war. Enslavement of women during times of conflict had deep roots in Siberian history.²² Historical documents provide numerous accounts of inter-ethnic military clashes that resulted in the plundering of the defeated, particularly involving the capture of women, children, and cattle.

A petition from 1642 for the baptism of a Yakut woman named Katok includes Katok's explanation of why she desired to convert to Orthodoxy where she shares her life story. She recounts that she could not recall her father's name as she was taken by Russians during a '*pogrom*' when she was only a child. She further explained that she had previously lived 'among Russians,' but that she now has nothing to eat or drink and was starving to death.²³ In short, Katok was forcibly captured from her community as a child, likely being one of those taken as trophies from the defeated local community.

Another form of enslavement in Siberia involved trafficking, where local people would sell their relatives to Russians. Sometimes the locals would sell their women to combat poverty. Gurvich mentioned that the Yukaghirs of Yana River sold their maidens and children to Russians because of hunger in 1659.²⁴ However, the women sold to Russians were not always orphans or from poor families. There are documented cases where individuals of higher social status willingly sold their daughters. For instance, local prince Orgui sold his daughter Mychak to a Russian serviceman for a cow.²⁵

²² Tokarev, *Obshchestvennyj stroj yakutov*, pp. 95–97.

²³ Arch. St.-P. IH RAS. Fund 160. Inventory 1. File 28, f. 13.

²⁴ Gurvich, *Etnicheskaya istoriya Severo-Vostoka Sibiri*, p. 21.

²⁵ Arch. St.-P. IH RAS. Fund 160. Inventory 1. File 43, ff. 26–27.

Russians did not necessarily purchase or capture local women in battle; sometimes they acquired them without any effort or payment. One such case is preserved in historical documents. It tells the story of Ladchka, a Yakut woman who was abandoned by her husband and left with no means of support. She sought refuge in the Russian camp and resided there for two years before eventually being brought to Yakutsk with her child in 1643. During her interrogation, Ladchka revealed that she had been a slave ('*yasyr*') of the fur trader Oderka Martemyanov. She had a child with him and expressed her desire to be baptised.²⁶ It appears that Martemyanov acquired this woman without any cost, lived with her for a period, and then seemingly cast her aside.

4. Prices

In their research on mixed communities in Northern Siberia, Peter Schweitzer, Evgeniy Golovko, and Nikolai Vakhtin (2002) argued that in the 17th century, women in North-Eastern Siberia were sold to Russians for 10–20 rubles. The authors supported their claim by referencing 19th century scholar Mikhailov further noting that the price was relatively high.²⁷

Mikhailov's article, published in 1886, primarily focused on serfdom and peasantry in 19th-century Siberia.²⁸ However, the introductory section briefly delves into the history of 17th-century Siberian slavery. Mikhailov mentioned the price range of 10–120 rubles for a local woman, accompanied by a comment that the price was low.

Mikhailov's introduction seems to be an inaccurate adaptation of Serafim Shashkov's 1872 paper on slavery in Siberia, the earliest study dedicated to the topic.²⁹ When discussing the enslavement of local women in Siberia, Shashkov mentioned that Russian authorities, such as governors, maintained harems of local women and participated in trafficking.³⁰ To support his argument, Shashkov referred to a publication of historical documents: 'Supplements to Historical Acts, collected and published by the Archaeographic Commission'. However, upon examination, the publication contains no mention of Siberian harems but rather petitions from Verkhoturys related to grain.³¹ Another phenomenon mentioned by Shashkov was the existence of brothels maintained by Russian authorities. Once again, he referenced a historical

²⁶ Ibid. File 53, f. 20.

²⁷ Vakhtin, Golovko, Schweitzer, *Starozhil'cheskie obshchnosti Severo-Vostoka Sibiri*, p. 13.

²⁸ Mikhailov, *Krepostnichestvo v Sibiri*, pp. 93–137.

²⁹ Shashkov, *Rabstvo v Sibiri*, pp. 163–187.

³⁰ Ibid. p. 165.

³¹ *Dopolneniya k aktam istoricheskim*, p. 69

source that, upon verification, was found to be irrelevant. In fact, the publication Shashkov referred to is a Tsar's charter to the Astrakhan Transfiguration Monastery and does not include any mention about brothels in Siberia.³²

Both Shashkov and Mikhailov portrayed the realities of 17th-century Siberia as a triumph of depravity and vice. According to them, both Cossacks and Russian authorities were depicted as corrupt individuals who engaged in practices such as having multiple wives and concubines, operating brothels, engaging in child molestation, and renting out their own wives. In speculating about the prices for local women and mentioning that the price varied between 10 and 20 rubles, both Shashkov and Mikhailov referred to 18th century Gerhard Friedrich Müller's 'History of Siberia'.³³

'History of Siberia' was not fully published during Müller's lifetime. Shashkov and Mikhailov cited its publication in the journal *«Ezhemesyachnye sochineniya, k pol'ze i uveseleniyu sluzhashchie»* from 1764, which included only chapters 6–8. Chapter 8 focused on the establishment of the Tobolsk diocese and territories of Western Siberia, including Narym, Pelym, Tara and Verkhoturys. Archbishop Kiprian († 1634) was reporting to Patriarch Filaret all the irregularities he had observed in Tobolsk and along his journey there. In a section titled 'A History of Mores', in the 31st paragraph, Müller recounted the observations of the archbishop regarding the relations between Cossacks and women. The passage states:

They, like the Tartars, bought and sold wives; when they needed money, they mortgaged them for a fixed term. They were devoid of jealousy or the tenderness that arises from a woman who belongs solely to us; on the contrary, they considered the ownership of a woman no different from owning any other property, which they could dispose of as they pleased. When a Cossack traveled to Moscow, he would often mortgage his wife until his return. Whoever offered him 10, 20, or more rubles for her would enjoy her company during that time. If, at the end of the agreed term, she was not redeemed, the lender could choose to keep her, marry her off to someone else, or sell her.³⁴

There are no references to primary sources in that section of Müller's paper. Therefore, it becomes evident that the mention of the price of 10–20 rubles for a woman in Yakutia, as stated in modern research, originates from 18th-century research that describes a different geographical region (Western Siberia, Tobolsk). Furthermore, the price mentioned in that book is associated with rentals rather than sales. Moreover, Müller's paper discusses the selling and renting of wives but does not specify that the wives were Indigenous women.

³² *Akty Istoricheskoe*, p. 183.

³³ Mikhailov, *Krepostnichestvo v Sibiri*, p. 96; Shashkov, *Rabstvo v Sibiri*, p. 165.

³⁴ Müller, *Sibirskaya istoriya*, p. 412.

As we have observed, scholars have referred to the price range of 10–20 rubles as both high and low. Even though this price does not align with the actual prices of the 17th century, it is important to note that 10–20 rubles in 17th century Siberia constituted a significant amount of money. According to the calculation of Galina Leontieva, the annual salary of a Cossack in the 17th century was 5 rubles.³⁵ Although a military personnel's salary included more than just money, encompassing items such as bread and salt, we can ascertain that 5 rubles constituted a significant sum.

The historical documents preserved in the Yakutsk archive contain valuable information regarding the prices of local women. During my research, I managed to identify 42 Yakut women who, between 1641 and 1646, sought permission for baptism in Orthodoxy. In most cases, all we have is a short petition containing a few details about the petitioner, but in some conflict situations, interrogations have survived, providing more details about the case, including the price that was paid for a woman. In 9 cases, there is information concerning transactions and prices.

Apparently, there was no standard price for a local woman, but it is possible to identify which items were most often exchanged for women. The most frequently mentioned item (four times) in the documents is a bed made from reindeer pelt. It could be accompanied by other items such as clothes, axes, copper pots, beads, and money, but in at least one case only the bed was offered in payment.

In three cases, livestock such as mares and cattle were offered in payment for a woman. For instance, Mychak, daughter of local Yakut leader Orgui, was sold to a serviceman named Nikulka Yuriev in exchange for a cow.³⁶ When paying for a local woman with livestock, additional items were not required, as was the case when paying with reindeer pelt beds. It is important to draw parallels here with the Yakut bride price, which was typically paid with livestock.

According to Gurvich, the price for a woman was equivalent to 40–50 sable pelts. He cited a document describing an incident from 1661/1662 in which Amos Mikhailov, an administrator of a Russian camp, sold his *yasyr* – a young Lamut woman – to her father for 40 sable pelts. However, he later took her back in exchange for two reindeer.³⁷ Gurvich built his argument on one concrete document, while there are other sources containing information that contradicts his point. For instance, Yakut woman Nomychai was sold in 1640 for 80 sable pelts.³⁸ We know that she was neither young nor of high social status.

In some cases, we can trace all transactions, including price changes and the movement of a woman from her home to Yakutsk fort. A notable example of this is

³⁵ Leont'eva, *Sluzhilye lyudi v Vostochnoj Sibiri*, pp. 81–82.

³⁶ Arch. St.-P. IH RAS. Fund. 160. Inventory 1. File 43. pp. 26–27.

³⁷ Gurvich, *Etnicheskaya istoriya Severo-Vostoka Sibiri*, p. 35.

³⁸ Arch. St.-P. IH RAS. Fund 160. Inventory 1. File 28. pp. 47–50.

the previously mentioned story of a Yakut woman Mynik. She was initially sold by her son-in-law to a Russian fur trader named Froll Samoilov, who paid half a ruble, a pot, and ten strands of white beads for her. Subsequently, she was sold to another trapper named Ivan Sokolov for one ruble. Finally, she was sold to the priest Vasili for two rubles.³⁹ It's worth noting that in 1640, it was possible to purchase a grain barn for two rubles in the region.⁴⁰

Another case that illustrates several stages of trafficking transactions in detail is the story of Agii. Testimonies from interrogators varied regarding the amount of money paid for Agii when she was first sold. According to some, it was 10 altyn (less than one third of a ruble), while according to others, it was 1 ruble.⁴¹ In addition to money, the Russian men paid one bed made from reindeer skin, 'a lot of beads,' and 10 muksuns (a type of whitefish widespread in Siberian Arctic waters). When Agii was sold for the second time, Orthodox priest Porphyrius paid a sum as high as 5 rubles for her.⁴²

Due to the meticulous research of Richard Hellie, who studied various forms of dependency in the European part of the Muscovite state, we have comparative material on the issue of prices. Hellie concluded that around the year 1600, the average price of a single adult male slave was about 3.3 rubles.⁴³ Although we do not yet have enough material to draw definitive conclusions concerning cash prices for local Siberian women, it is reasonable to assume that the prices found in historical sources for Eastern Siberia were like those mentioned by Hellie for Muscovy.

As we can see from the cases of Mynik and Agii, initially they were bought from Yakut people not only for money but also for other valuable items. However, when we observe other transactions that took place between Russians, we see that these women were exchanged for money only. Furthermore, we observe that the price increased significantly as a woman got closer to the fort, sometimes reaching up to four or five times the original price. The price of a local woman in Siberia likely varied based on factors such as her age and social status. Regardless, the price was generally quite high, making trafficking a profitable business. The highest price traced was 5 rubles paid for Agii, equivalent to a year's salary of a servicemen in the region.

³⁹ Ibid. File 28, ff. 35–41.

⁴⁰ Ibid. File 6, f. 22.

⁴¹ The Muscovite monetary system of that time was sophisticated: one ruble was equivalent to 33 altyn and 2 dengas, thus 10 altyn was less than one third of a ruble.

⁴² Arch. St.-P. IH RAS. Fund. 160. Inventory 1. File 142, ff. 30–35.

⁴³ Hellie, *Slavery in Russia*, p. 338.

5. Conclusion

Yakut women of various social statuses and ages were sold by their male relatives to Russian servicemen, fur traders, and trappers. Some were sold due to poverty, while the reason behind other sales is unknown. The practice of selling women was deeply rooted in the local traditions of Yakut society, where women held very low social status. Some women were captured by Russians during military conflicts with locals, while others sought sustenance, shelter, and protection by coming to Russian settlements.

Commercial relationships between Russian military personnel and local people existed in a grey area: although there were legal prohibitions against military personnel engaging in trade with locals, the administration of remote Russian settlements in Eastern Siberia was often unable to enforce these prohibitions and rarely imposed penalties. Fur traders and trappers could legally buy women from their male relatives, but they also needed to adhere to certain rules for the transactions to be considered fair.

Although Russian administrators attempted to regulate interactions between Russians and locals by requiring all Russians, regardless of their social status, to obtain permission to visit a nomadic camp, they often failed to control these contacts effectively. In conflict situations reflected in judicial trials, it became evident that Russians had established various relationships with locals, including living with them or engaging in commercial transactions including the purchase of women.

Upon examination of scholarly literature, it is clear that the common view of the price range of 10–20 rubles for a local woman is based on secondary literature from the 18th and 19th centuries that failed to provide valid references to historical sources. Papers published by Shashkov and Mikhailov are much more noteworthy as examples of orientalist fantasies about non-European sexuality among 19th-century intellectuals than as research into 17th century Siberian trafficking in women.

An examination of 60 petitions for baptism, 11 interrogations, and 9 surety bonds from the 1640s showed that Russians paid for Yakut women with various types of goods, as well as livestock. In transactions between Russians, payment for women was usually made using money. There were no stable prices; rather, prices varied dramatically depending on the age and status of the woman, and the distance from the administrative centre at Yakutsk fort.

