



**The role of livestock as wealth, identity and honor:  
Economic and anthropological analysis of livestock in Kyrgyz society**



**Kadyrbek Sultakeev (AUCA/JLU) & Aksana Ismailbekova (Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient)**

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## Motivation: Gulmira Apa's Story

**Real story:** During COVID-19, the Kyrgyz government banned livestock slaughter at funerals.

**Gulmira Apa (70)** insisted a horse must be slaughtered when she dies — as tradition demands.

For her, it was about **honor, identity, and respect**, not meat or money.

This illustrates the **tension between state policy and cultural tradition**

Central paradox in Kyrgyz life: why people are willing to give away what seems economically irrational, but socially necessary.

Building on Gulmira Apa's story, we ask the following question:

**Why and how people use livestock in ways that mix wealth, honor, and identity?**

*Answering this question helps us understand why development or policy reforms often fail when they overlook cultural values.*



- **Economic studies:**  
Treat livestock as *capital* — income, savings, insurance.  
Focus on markets and productivity but overlook *moral meaning*.
- **Anthropological studies:**  
Treat livestock as *culture* — rituals, kinship, social life.  
Explain *why* it matters but rarely measure *how* it affects economics.
- **The gap:**  
Few studies combine economic data and cultural interpretation.
- **Our contribution:**  
We bridge both views — showing that livestock use reflects both wealth and honor, profit and identity.

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## Harsh Winter Shocks and Distress Sales: Consumption and Asset Smoothing Among Livestock Farmers in Kyrgyzstan

Kadyrbek Sultakeev<sup>1,2,3</sup> | Martin Petrick<sup>1,4,5</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Institute for Agricultural Policy and Market Research, Justus Liebig University Giessen, Giessen, Germany | <sup>2</sup>American University of Central Asia (AUCA), Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan | <sup>3</sup>Tashkent Institute of Irrigation and Agricultural Mechanization Engineers – National Research University (TIAME-NRU), Tashkent, Uzbekistan | <sup>4</sup>Center for International Development and Environmental Research (ZEU), Justus Liebig University Giessen, Giessen, Germany | <sup>5</sup>Leibniz Institute of Agricultural Development in Transition Economies (IAMO), Halle (Saale), Germany

**Correspondence:** Kadyrbek Sultakeev (kadyrbek.sultakeev@gmail.com)

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### ABSTRACT

The sale of livestock has long been considered a means of mitigation in case of drought, but there is no evidence of how this is achieved in the event of severe winters. This article focuses on the exceptionally harsh winter days that Kyrgyzstan experienced in 2012, as well as harsh winter days in other years, to analyse how livestock owners responded to the shock. Our quantitative analysis is based on nationally representative household panel data combined with geo-referenced daily temperature data. The results of the fixed effect regression show a heterogeneous household response to harsh winter days consistent with a poverty trap, which is supported by qualitative evidence. Rich households sell their animals to smooth consumption, while poor households prioritize protecting their scarce assets and are generally unable or unwilling to sell. While this asset-preserving strategy may support long-term economic resilience, it is associated with statistically significant declines in food consumption among poor households during severe winter shocks, indicating a trade-off between short-term welfare and asset protection.

**JEL Classification:** G52, O13, Q12



# Dual Method Approach: Economics Meets Anthropology

## **Anthropology** (Qualitative)

Explains **why** people act as they do — the meanings, traditions, and moral logic behind livestock use.

Methods: Fieldwork, interviews, participant observation in Naryn, Chui, and Issyk-Kul.

Focus: Kinship, honor, identity, respect, reciprocity.

## **Economics** (Quantitative)

Measures **how** people act — the patterns in sales, gifts, and slaughtering using LiK survey data.

Methods: Regression analysis, descriptive statistics, econometric testing.

Focus: Assets, networks, events, household behavior.

Together, these methods complement each other:

**Anthropology gives depth and meaning. Economics gives evidence and generalization.**

**Through this dual lens that we understand how people turn wealth into honor and economy into identity.**



## Local Worldview

In Kyrgyz greetings, people often ask, “**Мал жаныңар аманбы?**” — “**Are your livestock well?**” Livestock symbolizes **life and well-being**, the safeguard of one’s soul and prosperity.

A common blessing says: «**Алдыңарды мал бассын, артыңарды бала бассын**» — “**May livestock fill your path, and children follow behind.**” It wishes both **wealth and continuity**.

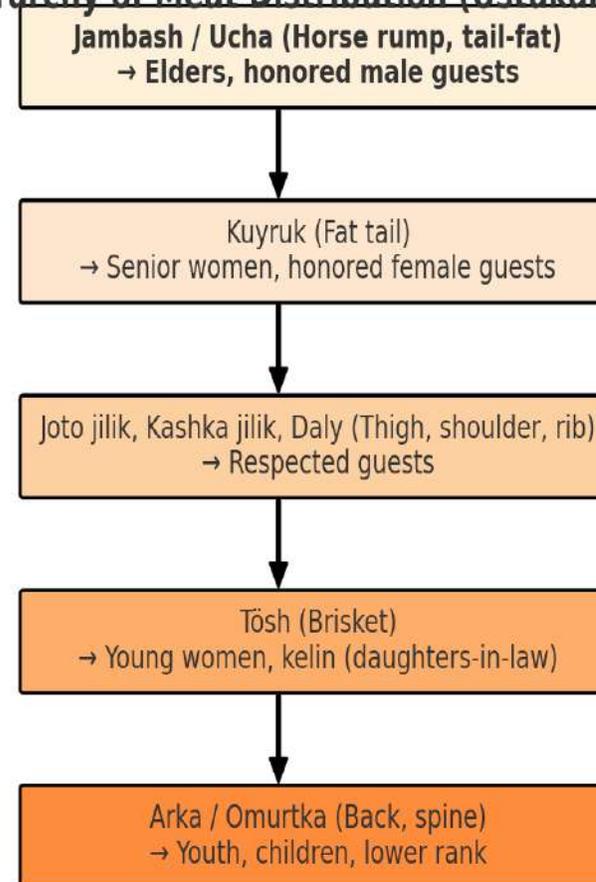
As another proverb reminds us: “**If you don’t care for your livestock, it will leave; if you don’t care for your wife, she will leave.**”

Animals are not property — they belong to the **moral and social world of humans**.

These greetings and sayings reveal that in Kyrgyz culture, livestock is a measure of both life and dignity. Asking about one’s animals is not just about wealth — it’s asking, ‘Is your world still whole?’”

# Meat Hierarchy Diagram

## Hierarchy of Meat Distribution (Ustukan System)



### Legend & Regional Variations

-  Given to honored male guests
-  Given to senior women
-  Shared among respected guests
-  Given to young women (kelin)
-  Shared by youth and children
- ↓ Arrow = Social hierarchy
- Color = Recipient group

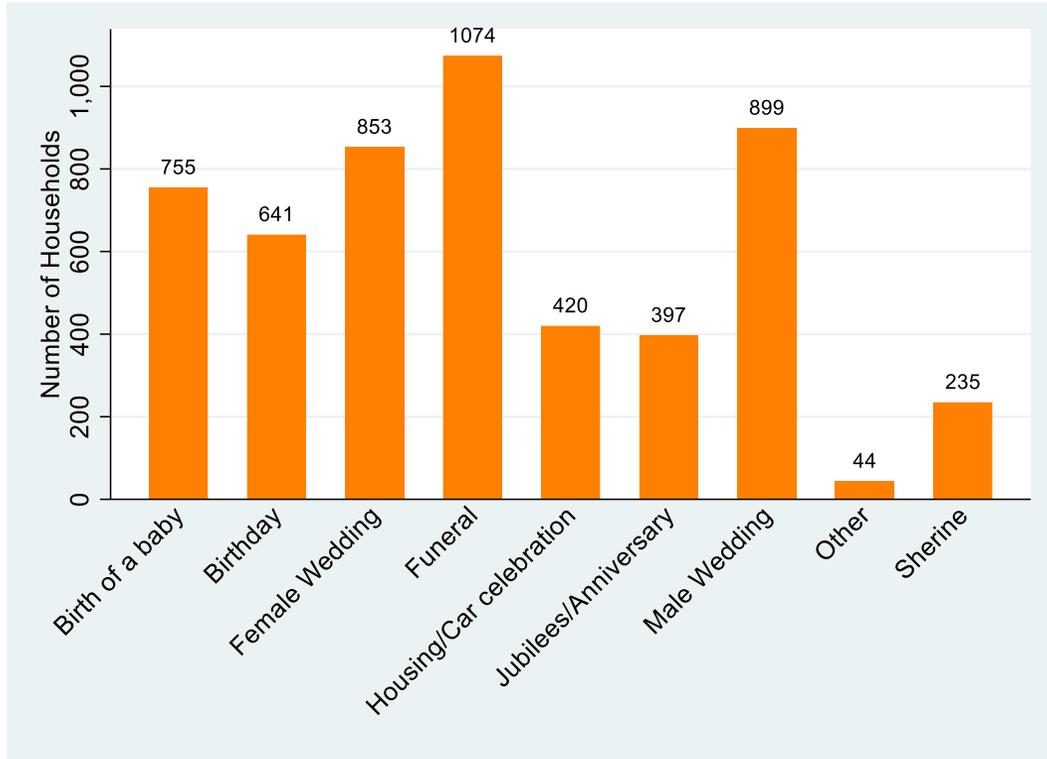
### Regional Differences:

- Naryn: Head given to youngest male
- Chui: Head to most respected male
- Osh: Fat portions = prestige

Each bone has symbolic meaning (age, status, gender)

Mistakes → insult, conflict, social rift

*Symbolic order of respect, age, gender, and social status in Kyrgyz feasts*



## Ritual Participation in Kyrgyzstan (LiK Survey)

- **Funerals** – most attended; a communal and religious duty.
- **Weddings** – second most common; display of generosity and prestige.
- **Birth of a baby** – third most common social event
- **Smaller events** (birthdays, car purchases) – more personal, less collective.
- Ritual participation remains a key measure of belonging and moral citizenship.

Source: derived by the authors from the LiK dataset



**Figure 2. Correlation of Animals Slaughtered to Funding of Events Through Livestock Sales.**

The **median** number of animals slaughtered is about **3–4** for the “yes” group versus **1–2** for the “no” group.

Households that **sold livestock to finance events** slaughtered **significantly more animals on average** than those that did not. Livestock is a key financial and symbolic currency.

Events funded by livestock sales → more animals slaughtered



## Quantitative Evidence III: Slaughtering vs. Non-Slaughtering Households

Variable	Non-slaughtering group (h417_1=1) Mean (SD)	Slaughtering group (h417_1=0) Mean (SD)	t-test (p-value)
Traditional Expenditure (traditional expense)	9,297 (10,718)	13,024 (33,929)	t = -2.61, p = 0.009
Gifts Received (h418_1 and h418_2)	922 (8,030)	36,338 (61,736)	t = -8.22, p < 0.001
Gifts Contributed (h426 and h427)	3,044 (5,518)	4,328 (5,846)	t = -2.76, p = 0.006
Number of Guests (h410)	26 (2.80)	111 (5,66)	t = -10,95 p = 0.000

- Slaughtering households spend 40% more on rituals — transforming income into reputation
- They host four times more guests — creating dense social ties
- They give and receive more gifts — reinforcing reciprocity networks
- Livestock use in ceremonies is an investment in social capital, not a wasteful expense

# Regression Summary

ELU (Livestock holdings)	Wealth and asset capacity	Households with more livestock participate more in rituals, gifts, and sales → they have both the means and social obligation to share.
Social networks	Kinship and community ties	Strong networks increase gifting and slaughtering → livestock circulates through relationships, not markets.
Weddings	Ritual and moral obligation	Major driver of livestock sales → people sell animals to gain respect and fulfill social duties, not just for profit.
Material assets (car, tractor, land)	Economic capital	Mostly insignificant → culture, not wealth, explains livestock exchange behavior.
Gender	Division of roles	Male-headed households show more market-related livestock use; female-headed households more symbolic and relational roles.

We find that **social networks** and **wedding events** — not household wealth — are the strongest predictors of livestock sales, gifts, and slaughtering. This means families use animals not only for income but also to fulfill **moral and cultural obligations**

## **Economic Logic**

Maximize income

Rational choice

Market contracts

Monetary assets

## **Cultural Logic**

Maximize respect & reputation

Moral obligation

Kinship obligations

Symbolic capital

## Findings

## Policy Recommendations

People use livestock not only for income but also to express wealth, honor and identity.

Policies must work with culture, not against it — recognizing livestock as both economic and moral value.

Rituals (weddings, funerals) and social networks shape livestock exchange more than wealth or markets.

Build on local traditions of sharing and reciprocity — these can serve as foundations for community-based insurance or social support systems.

Economic reforms often fail when they ignore cultural meanings.

Reforms fail when they ignore moral and social values — because they misunderstand the logic that guides household decisions.

Livestock reinforces cooperation and social trust within communities.

Respecting culture strengthens cooperation, trust, and resilience — key for sustainable development and policy acceptance.

- Livestock in Kyrgyzstan is more than an asset — it is a language of respect and morality.
- Every act — selling, gifting, or slaughtering — carries social and symbolic meaning.
- Livestock speaks two languages: money and morality.
- Understanding livestock means understanding Kyrgyz life itself - where economy and culture are inseparable
- *“Сойгон койуң семиз болсун” — “May the sheep you slaughter be fat.”*  
*“Конок келсе кой сой” — “When a guest arrives, slaughter a sheep.”*
- People use livestock to unite wealth, honor, and identity — where economy and morality are one.

Gulmira Apa's story reflects Kyrgyz society —where **livestock speaks both money and morality**, and **true wealth lies in animals and relationships**.

Thank You!



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