

## FIFTEEN



### WHAT HOLDS THE CLAN TOGETHER?<sup>1</sup>

[223–236; 316–332; 109–120; 49–56]<sup>2</sup>

WHAT ARE THE MEANS by which this astonishing institution, the Gilyak clan, envelops the individual more completely than a modern state? The clan can demonstrate the greatest concern for its members while at the same time circumscribing their actions with the widest network of rules and “sins.” Where are the outward bodies, so important to the European observer, which fulfill these functions? Is it not strange that such outward mechanisms should seem so absent? [49]

When writing about the Chukchi, Nordenskiöld wrote, “Here, as in all Chukch villages which we afterwards visited, absolute anarchy prevailed. At the same time the greatest unanimity reigned in the little headless community.”<sup>3</sup> Nordenskiöld would probably have said the same of the Gilyak, for a number of other travelers have made similar observations about the primitive peoples they encountered. Indeed, the social organization described in the preceding chapter, which is the very soul of a primitive society, is very often hidden from the eyes of the passing observer. To the untrained eye, any deviation from European trappings of statehood, such as well-defined territory, representatives of authority, or a binding rule of law signals “anarchy,” by which nonetheless, to at least Nordenskiöld’s surprise, “members of these acephalous communities lived together in harmony and friendship” [50].

Gilyak social structure strikes the novice in just this fashion. Notwithstanding all the complexities of its social fabric, covering all aspects of life, all the formal outward signs of social organization, which the European hunts for everywhere as if by reflex, are either completely absent or found in the most tentative forms.

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<sup>1</sup> [Editor’s note: The AMNH Russian typescript and the 1933 Soviet editions of this chapter titled it, “The Mechanism of the Clan,” while the AMNH English typescript used the title, “The Mechanism of the Gilyak Gens.” I follow the AMNH English typescript in moving the first paragraph of this chapter from the end of chapter fourteen in order to take advantage of its directional focus.]

<sup>2</sup> [Editor’s note: Shternberg published a version of this chapter nearly identical to the AMNH and the 1933 Soviet editions in Shternberg, “Giliaki,” *Etnograficheskoe Obozrenie* 28, no. 63 (1904h), 97–111.]

<sup>3</sup> [Editor’s note: The quotation is from Adolf Erik Nordenskiöld, *Voyage of the Vega around Asia and Europe*, Vol. 1 (London: MacMillan, 1881), 449.]

## TERRITORY

Quite naturally, members of one clan prefer to live together in face-to-face communication with each other. There are, indeed, several settlements such as Tangi, Nianevo, and Viskvo in which the entire population belongs to a single clan. Sometimes the big winter yurtas in such settlements may contain from 20 to 30 kinsmen, yet not one stranger. Even in a village such as Kol', where a number of clans are found, the dwellings of each clan are aligned row by row, as if by long-observed tradition. Each clan has its own river areas for hunting, shared between families among whom they are passed from generation to generation, from father to son. It should be noted, however, that rights to property are circumscribed by actual use, with interludes when hunting and fishing grounds become *res nullius* and can be used by anyone, even strangers.<sup>4</sup>

The idea of property rights with respect to territory is absent among the Gilyak. Fifty years ago nomadic Tungus appeared in Sakhalin and began to hunt on traditional Gilyak territories. Yet it never occurred to the Gilyak to protest against the invasion, although the Tungus appeared in small groups and could hardly have defended themselves had force been used.

The surname of a clan alone likewise leaves us only partially informed. Among many primitive, so-called totemic tribes, the clan name is the most striking indication of clan unity. There is nothing like that among the Gilyak, although totemic legends exist among some clans. For instance, the clan living in Tangi considers itself a relative of the bear, because a woman of that clan gave birth to a deformed child whose traits somewhat resembled those of a bear. Similar legends exist among several other clans. In many clans there are only territorial names. If a Gilyak wants to refer to persons of a particular clan, he usually says, "The inhabitants of such and such a place." Sometimes this coincides with the actual residence of the clan, but most often it only indicates the oldest settlement of the clan in question [51].

For example, in Kol' clans bear the following names: Tyvli-fing, inhabitants of the settlement Tyvli; Mekhre-fing, inhabitants of Mekhre; Nenkhai-fing, inhabitants of Nenkhai, etc.; yet the members of these clans have already lived for a long time there and have lost all connection with the old habitations of their ancestors. The only clans having real clan names are those composed of Tungus emigrants, such as Tskharung and Chori'. It is of interest that among these tribes we find a definite transition to totemism. For instance, among the Negidal, almost every clan reckons its origin from some animal, such as the tiger, toad, or bear. Among the Gilyak, this occurs very seldom.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> [Editor's note: In the AMNH Russian typescript and the 1933 Soviet editions, a further paragraph following this continues Shternberg's argument that territory cannot ultimately be an indicator of clan strength. Even in more prosperous areas, he reasons, Gilyak clans have traditionally achieved peaceful resource sharing. An excellent study of Gilyak property and marriage rights is found in Erukhim Abramovich Kreinovich, "Perezhitki rodovoi sobstvennosti i gruppovogo braka u giliakov," *Trudy Instituta Antropologii, Arkheologii i Etnografii* 4 (1936), 711-754.]

<sup>5</sup> [Editor's note: After Shternberg, the fullest study and listing of Gilyak clans on Sakhalin and the Amur at the turn of the century is found in Anna V. Smoliak, "Rodovoi sostav nivkhov v XIX-nachale XX v.," in *Sotsial'naiia organizatsiia i kul'tura narodov Severa* (Moscow: Akademiia Nauk, 1974), 176-217.]

Let us now consider executive powers or institutions which, from the point of view of the European, should be the most important feature of clan unity. As we have seen, notwithstanding the complexity of clan life, there are no institutionalized authorities. The Chinese and the Russians attempted once to establish the institution of *starosta* among the Gilyak, not over clans but over entire settlements.<sup>6</sup> This institution bore no relation whatsoever to the life of the clan and proved little more than an unattractive episode. In the Russian case, imperial officials selected *starostas* from among the most complacent Gilyak, rather than the wealthiest and the best. The old organization of the clan never knew anything like it. Patriarchal authority, which on the basis of biblical examples is usually associated with the clan organization, and which we still meet among the Buriat, Kirghiz, and various peoples of the Caucasus, is absolutely absent among the Gilyak, and in general among other tribes in a similar stage of development. It is absent even within the family, although women are subject to their fathers and brothers before marriage, and to their husbands after that.

Such despotism, however, has nothing in common with the Roman *patria potestas*. The killing or selling of women into slavery is impossible. Forcible marriages are quite frequent, but this to a large degree is connected with the religious sanction of marriages between children of brothers and sisters. In general, the attitude towards daughters is tender before as well as after marriage. The most intimate ties of hospitality and mutual aid are established between the families of the *akhmalk* and *imgi*. In cases of ill-treatment of the woman by her husband, she always finds protection among her kinsmen. As for the rest, the matrimonial relations are usually very tender. Men take counsel with their wives, and older women even participate in clan meetings.<sup>7</sup>

There are no signs of despotism with respect to males, as is evident from the attitudes of the older men toward their children. Indeed, a civilized person would find it hard to imagine the degree of equality and respect which rules here in relation to youths. Adolescents, those of even 10 or 12 years of age, consider themselves full and equal members of society. The oldest and most respected persons listen to what they have to say and answer them as seriously and respectfully as they would persons of their own age. Neither difference of age nor position is felt by anyone. Indeed, by the age of 10 or 12 the Gilyak boy is already an accomplished gentleman.<sup>8</sup> He not only knows the ins and outs of daily chores but is an expert hunter, fisher, and paddler,

<sup>6</sup> [**Editor's note:** *Starosta* is a Russian administrative term for section head, group leader, or, in the context of a *sel'skii starosta* of which Shternberg speaks, village headman. It is noteworthy that when Russian officials on Sakhalin first allowed the exiled Shternberg to travel through North Sakhalin, they mandated and empowered him to appoint *starostas* throughout Gilyak villages. Here and in his field diaries, he remarked on the futility of these efforts, precisely because in the eyes of Gilyaks, clan life preempted the need for state regulation. See "Dnevnik puteshestviia L. Ia. Shternberga," (1891), AAN f. 282, l. 1, d. 190, l. 48.]

<sup>7</sup> [**Editor's note:** As a rule, these were postmenopausal women. For a fuller discussion of menstrual taboos among Siberian peoples, see Marjorie Mandelstam Balzer, "Rituals of Gender Identity: Markers of Siberian Khanty Ethnicity, Status and Belief," *American Anthropologist* 83, no. 4 (1981), 850–867. For a more general study, see Thomas Buckley and Alma Gottlieb, eds., *Blood Magic: The Anthropology of Menstruation* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1988).]

<sup>8</sup> [**Editor's note:** The Russian language version of this sentence in the AMNH Russian typescript and the 1933 Soviet editions incorporating Shternberg's bilingual cursive reads, "Pravda, giliatskii podrostok 10–12 let obyknovenno uzhe accomplished gentleman."]

working alongside others like anyone else. He already possesses a good part of the spiritual knowledge of his clan; he knows from practice all the customs and religious rights; he remembers all the clan names, as well as the legends, tales and songs of his tribe. Moreover, the constant companionship of his elders in travel, hunting, and fishing give him a wide knowledge of the people and of life in general. From this comes his dignity, his solidity in conversation, and his ability to behave properly in society [52].

If sons choose to move away from their parents, they know they will receive a part of the family chattel such as sledges and so on. The association is quite free and one can leave whenever one pleases. However, it is more common for a number of generations to live in a common household. Every member of such a family is allowed to have individual possessions of sledges, dogs, or arms, and everyone has a right to his own earnings resulting from personal efforts. Every member shares everything with his clansmen, especially foodstuffs, even those he has purchased. This generosity is quite voluntary. Flour and rice bought in town are boiled in the common kettle for all. Communism and individualism coexist without friction.

Finally, it is notable that the head of the family of the common household need not necessarily always be the oldest member of it. On the contrary, young men who have proved themselves skillful, zealous, and clever are more often found at the head of families. The elders enjoy authority on special questions as keepers of tradition, experts on ceremonies and the history of clan relationships. They are consulted in cases of complex questions of kinship, the naming of children, and the conduct of ritual feasts. While these matters and more are under their care, this gives them no power or privilege.

As there is no despotism on the part of the family elders, so too there is none in the clan. There are no patriarchs vested with full power, nor any regular fixed authority, whether collective or individual, elected or by birthright or inheritance. However, nor is the clan a mere figment of the imagination. It is a complex organization which surrounds the Gilyak in a web of regulations, taboos, and obligations, giving him all the material and spiritual advantages of a solid social organization. In this context, we return to the question raised at the outset of this chapter: What are the powers that regulate this all-powerful organization? What holds the clan together in the absence of force?

The secret is found in two places—in the simplicity of Gilyak economic conditions, which leave wide opportunity for the fullest development of the individual personality, and in a holistic worldview which directs the will and activity of each individual toward common harmony through the cultivation of inner consciousness.

Let us consider these factors more closely. The prevalent economic system among the Gilyak is based on individual labor combined with the simplest form of cooperation. Fishing is the main source of food. The sea and the rivers are so rich with fish that everybody can supply his wants individually with the help of a few elementary tools. The hunting of sea mammals requires the cooperation of several persons, but it is so simple that there is no need for masters and workmen, nor any need for special organization. Each does what he is able. Furthermore, the work crew [*artel'*] usually

consists of kin, and it would not strike anyone to divide the spoils of the hunt in any other way than by the number of workers. A part of it is given to those who were not even present at the expedition. After all, do clan gods give only to some but not all clan members? The hunting of land mammals is carried on in the same way [53].

Nonetheless, a hunter or fisherman can usually get along without help. In the fishing seasons, Gilyak scatter far and wide, each man to his favorite place. In the hunting seasons, everyone gets into his individual cabin and watches his traps from there without seeing anyone for weeks. Therefore, individual work is the prevailing economic form. Everyone must be able to do everything. They must possess all the knowledge of their tribe, be equal, versatile, and prepared for life.

As the gifts of nature are so abundant, free, and accessible, the well-being of a man depends only on his personal abilities and zeal. Inequality, which under more complex conditions could be the source of discord and social differences, does not manifest itself here. A wealthy man owes everything to his personal abilities and virtues. His accumulations can neither exploit nor degrade another person. Besides, whatever talents a man has are the gifts of the gods and consequently the chosen one cannot provoke jealousy or be proud of his advantages.<sup>9</sup> His guardians, who send him game from the forest and the fish from the waters, are the common spirits of his clan. To accumulate goods without sharing them would be to usurp things which belong to him as well as all his clansmen. The greatest ambition of such a man would thus be to manifest his generosity and benevolence toward all. Such are the economic conditions responsible for the integrity and the equality of the people, which exclude all possibilities of exploitation, creating a wholesome atmosphere where each is conscious of his freedom and self-determination.

The highest degree of integrity of a person is determined by his socioreligious outlook. The basic axiom of the Gilyak is that every man's existence and well-being depend wholly upon the deities, particularly those of his clan, who favor not him alone but his entire group. Therefore any attempt to monopolize the gifts of the deities must entail just punishment. Everything prescribed by religion and the wisdom of the clan in order to gain the goodwill of the deities is a blessing for every member; the fulfillment of these demands is a matter of self-betterment. The same applies to all clan prescriptions, be they sexual, those of vengeance, or religious ones. All social acts of greater or lesser importance, up to and including self-sacrifice in battles avenging a kinsman, are categorical religious imperatives which neither brook hesitation nor demand their own enforcement.

All instincts of self-preservation are in complete harmony with their religion. By an act of vengeance a man defends himself and performs his religious duty at the same time. He pacifies the soul of the deceased, for if not avenged the soul can punish

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<sup>9</sup> The following example well illustrates the attitude of the Gilyak toward personal goods. Gibel'ka, from the settlement of Tangi, was the wealthiest person in my day on western Sakhalin. He was a prominent man because of his intelligence, skill, and energy. Moreover, his relations with the Russians helped him much, as he was a contractor of furs and [ethnographic and natural science] collections. Nonetheless, the Gilyak considered his extraordinary wealth as due only to a piece of cloth that he once found under a tree in the mountains. This was regarded as a talisman sent by the gods.

him. The person who has integrated his social and religious outlook finds harmony between his personal and social interests. He is the secret of the powerful clan. How smoothly he influences the life of all Gilyak can be found in the following scenarios [54].

A clansman dies. It is necessary to provide for his family, preserve his property until his heirs grow up, and decide, in order to avoid quarrels, to whom his widow should be given. There are neither judges nor authorities, but some time after the burial the nearest relatives of the deceased meet, discuss, and listen to the candidates. They will decide who is to be the husband of the widow and the father of her children.<sup>10</sup>

A family is temporarily in need. There is no special body to take care of them, yet this is not necessary, for even the remotest of relatives will offer their hospitality and help until hard times have passed. And nobody is the loser because almost everyone will use this hospitality at some time or another.

An elaborate and expensive clan feast is to be arranged. There are no collections, no acts of compulsion, and no committees for the reception of the guest. Everyone prepares what he can, contributes his share of the work, and a richer person takes upon himself the duty of arranging the feast. The prepared food is taken into his house, where people meet to partake in the preparations.

When a bear festival is held, dozens of people gather from all parts of the country for several days. Hosts must feed visitors and visiting dog teams alike. There is much work and many expenses; nevertheless they arrange everything simply and satisfactorily. Every guest prefers to visit those who are his nearest relatives or most sympathetic friends, where he is accepted not out of duty but by inclination. In every house, all are met with a warm if not hearty reception, because everyone is anxious to manifest his goodwill to all the newcomers in these days of festivity.

Famine falls on the settlement. All sufferers who have not left for more favorable places gather at the home of the one who has provisions. The rules of hospitality function in days of scarcity as in those of abundance.

The worst of calamities happens: A clansman is murdered. War is inevitable, and the entire population is up in arms. There is neither a permanent chief nor an elder. Nor are there elections. The only natural leader known and recognized by everybody is the bravest and most successful of the clansmen. He is the so-called *yz*, the master to whom all eyes are turned. In a single moment, an equal among equals suddenly becomes the war leader, gives orders, distributes arms, and fixes the date of the

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<sup>10</sup> [*Editor's note:* Shternberg is laconic here and elsewhere on the agency of women during such negotiations, despite the fact that women emerged as such tenacious actors in the descriptions of armed conflict in the previous chapter.]

campaign. He is obeyed like a dictator. If this natural chief dies or is killed during the campaign, everyone knows another worthy person who can replace him.

In cases of discord between clansmen or with representatives of different clans, no one person decides on the disputes or lawsuits *ex officio*. Very often the claimant himself is judge and enforcer. If his debtor refuses to fulfill his obligations voluntarily, the claimant unhesitatingly takes possession of the dogs of the debtor or enters the debtor's storehouse in order to take the things owed him. Of course, such action is not always possible, but in each case the matter is settled without an official authority. It is enough if the offended applies directly or through some spokesman (*khelai nivukh*) to one or another prominent man from the clan of the offender, and the matter will soon be settled. The offender is called and will appear with his nearest kin and sometimes a spokesman. Outsiders also gather round. After both sides are heard and the opinions of those present are given, the majority opinion becomes the verdict. Usually the offender obeys it voluntarily, but if he does not, then those who settled the affair start for his storehouse and confiscate what was adjudged.

But who are these authorities? Who appears on the scene, personally or together with other clansmen, to manifest initiative and authority as if they were vested with power? What is their role in the daily life of the people? They are the so-called *yzg'u*, "the masters," who may also be known simply as the *urdla nivkh'gu*, the "good ones," or wealthy prominent men (wealthy and good are synonyms among all primitive tribes). They are individuals with much property. Their bravery, skill, power, wisdom, and intelligence place them in a favorable position in the struggle for existence. In the narrow circles of their families, such individuals are the natural household heads. On account of such an individual's talents, the management of the household is carried on with greater success than it would have been had it been conducted separately. The large family centered around him is better provided with the fruits of nature, including tobacco as well as various market commodities. That is because his wealth and associations enable him to undertake extensive trips to trade in furs and buy commodities first hand. He is the guardian of the common *sagund* (valuables) of his nearest kin and has his own, which is also at the disposal of his kin in time of need [55].

To the entire clan, he is the man in whose house one can always eat well, regale oneself with tobacco or tea, and listen to interesting conversation. He is also the man who can help in time of need. He is especially valuable in times of general calamity, such as war, or lawsuits with a stranger. He has the best arms and the best means of transportation. His name frightens the foe, who agrees to make peace more quickly. Finally, his reserve of *sagund* can be used when it is necessary to pay a ransom. Such a man is usually broad-minded, eloquent, and in possession of a wide knowledge of life and people. He is a natural spokesman in important cases of revenge and civil conflicts. He is even consulted by strangers in need of mediators. Thus these masters enjoy celebrity throughout the territory of the Gilyak, and in their likeness are conceived the deities of the mountains, the seas, and the heavens. They are treated almost with religious adoration. In other tribes with different social organizations, these are the persons who become rulers.

The Gilyak clan does not foster these ambitions. The *yz* is merely one person among many, and between him and his poorer relatives altercations have not yet occurred. At the same time the strongest ties of brotherhood prevail.

Such is the glue bonding all the Gilyak together. Wholesome, well-developed personalities with integrated social and religious ideas are the clan's wellspring. Organized power is completely absent. Instead we find almost invisible elements of authority with few pretensions to power. These elements appear on the scene as though they were accidental, rather than fixed elements of power encroaching on the free expression of the individual.<sup>11</sup>

Following from the three central elements of authority in Gilyak life—the clan itself, the principle of seniority, and the concept of the *yz* (master)—we might expect favorable conditions to give rise to the unique forms of power we find among many cultured peoples both presently and from the historical horizons of all civilized nations—public gatherings, councils of elders, patriarchies, tsar-priests, military leaders, dukes, Vikings, kings, and so on. Among the Gilyak, however, these elements are only in their embryonic stages, and it is unlikely that they will ever be spurred to such further development.

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<sup>11</sup> [*Editor's note:* The AMNH Russian typescript and the 1933 Soviet editions conclude this chapter with four further paragraphs highlighting the most effective bodies of authority in Gilyak life. Of these four paragraphs, I have restored the last one, which follows here, reminding us of Shtenberg's Morganian evolutionist spirit.]