



AFTERWORD: AFTERLIVES AND AFTERWORLDS
Nivkhi on *The Social Organization of the Gilyak*, 1995

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BY THE ADVENT of World War II, the lives of most Gilyaks had changed dramatically. The Soviet government officially recognized the use of their self-designation, "Nivkh," and in the Soviet drive to create proletarians from primitives, the idea of "Gilyak" came to take on pejorative connotations of all things past. That the government embraced the name "Nivkh" as a hallmark of native self-determination, but simultaneously forbade Nivkhi to speak the Nivkh language, was only one of many contradictions between tradition and modernity that their belonging in the new Soviet Union had set before them.¹

For the new Nivkh society, one of the greatest legacies of the post-World War II period was the widespread integration of women into the workforce. Before the war, efforts to recruit women into Sovietized native institutions such as clan councils foundered on the reluctance of Nivkh men and women alike. With the conscription of Nivkh and Russian men to the war front, women all over Sakhalin and the Amur had to take the work of the fishing collectives into their own hands. During my own fieldwork on Sakhalin in 1990, one woman explained to me,

I was 10 when the war started. I had only been in school a year but our mother had no money, so I started working on the kolkhoz. There were other young girls, 13, 15, but I was 11—I was the youngest. It didn't seem so strange at the time. My mother had already been working on *Five Year Plan* [a fishing kolkhoz] hauling fish, so I worked with her. Now it's all

¹ For a sampling of thorough readings and surveys of nationality policy and language debates among peoples of the former Soviet Union, see Barbara Anderson and Brian Silver, "Equality, Efficiency and Politics in Soviet Bilingual Education Policy 1934–1980," *American Political Science Review* 78, no. 4 (October 1984), 1019–39; Gail Warshofsky Lapidus, "Ethnonationalism and Political Stability: The Soviet Case," *World Politics* 36, no. 4 (July 1984), 355–380; Teresa Rakowska-Harmstone, "The Dialectics of Nationalism in the USSR," *Problems of Communism* XXIII (May–June 1974), 1–22; Yuri Slezkine, *Arctic Mirrors: Russia and the Small Peoples of the North* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1994); Graham Smith, ed. *The Nationalities Question in the Soviet Union* (New York: Longman, 1990); and Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Revenge of the Past: Nationalism, Revolution and the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 1993).



FIG. 23. World War II brought about the wide integration of Gilyak (Nivkh) women into the Soviet workplace. Here, a Nivkh postal carrier delivers the journal *Novoe Vremia* [*New Time*] in the northeastern coast village of Chaivo, 1950. Courtesy of the Sakhalin Regional Museum, Nogliki Branch.

mechanized, but back then it was hellish work. We had to pull in the fish nets by hand. Most of the times we didn't have gloves, out on the ice, pulling in nets that had been underwater. It really hurt, but if you let go you only had to pull them in again. We cried, we ran around . . . anything to keep warm. But we were pretty good.²

² Field quotations are taken from interviews I conducted in the North Sakhalin villages of Nogliki, Chir-Unvd, Okha, Moskal'vo, Nekrasovka, Rybnoe, Rybnovsk, and Romanovka between 1990 and 1995.

Another Nivkh woman explained,

There were only 15 of us in our brigade, but we worked hard. There was another brigade of men, sailors, who sometimes tried to help, but they had a terrible time! They couldn't work as well as us. When the war ended I was only 19. That's when I became a Stakhanovets.³ They gave us the award on August 31st, on the beach. Vorobev came from the *raiispolkom* [regional executive committee]. There were three of us from the women's brigade, and some men too. I still have the Stalin pin they gave me. I wear it on holidays.

The integration of women sped production as well as Soviet reeducation, and the heady years after the war were marked by proclamations of economic triumph. On the fishing kolkhoz Freedom in Lupolovo, the net intake per fisherman almost doubled in the 3-year period between 1954 and 1957; in 1957 the kolkhoz overfulfilled its plan by 235%.⁴ Projections through to the early 1960s on all North Sakhalin fishing kolkhozes were comparably ambitious, and plans were approved to diversify into fish processing. Whether these striking figures had any basis in fact is open to question, but their importance here is the contribution they made to perceptions of social development. By the time the Nivkh ethnographer Chuner Taksami hailed the "renaissance of the Nivkh people," his work reflected the official position that Gilyaks had made their great stride into history. Nivkh living standards had increased by such an extent since the 1930s, he contended, that "they differed little from those of the Russians."⁵ Moreover, the new way of life had brought about fundamental changes in Nivkh consciousness.

New psychological characteristics developed which were typical of socialist societies—political awareness, a socialist attitude to labor, Soviet patriotism, trust and respect for other peoples and the feeling of civil obligation toward the socialist homeland.⁶

The spirit of change was the order of the day, but there was still sufficient ambiguity in the implementation of the Soviet nationality policy for Nivkhi to maintain some fundamental aspects of an otherwise familiar lifestyle: extensive fishing rights, a seasonal work cycle, and, perhaps most importantly, residence in favorable territories. Yet despite such outward signs of change—shamans liquidated, languages repressed, and towns relocated—most Nivkh men and women in the first decades after the war could speak of the shadow lives they might have lived. If Nivkh women who began working as fish processors and office clerks invariably reported that they married for love, they could also tell you of the "men they might have married if,"

³ Stakhanovites were members of a movement that began in 1935 to raise labor productivity. Soviet government image makers credited Aleksei Stakhanov, the eponymous worker hero, with record production figures in coal mining, establishing him as an icon for exemplary performance in industry.

⁴ Chuner Mikhailovich Taksami, *Vozrozhdenie nivkhskei narodnosti* (Iuzhno-Sakhalinsk: Sakhalinskoe knizhnoe izdatel'stvo, 1959), 47.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 60.

the men to whom they were pledged by clan marriage rules at childbirth, arrangements that they later declined but did not forget.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, many of these essential familiarities shifted in yet another round of state-sponsored resettlements, which they had been subject to since the regular arrival of the Russians a century earlier. In 1957, the Central Committee of the Communist Party and the Soviet Council of Ministers adopted Decree No. 300, "On Measures for the Further Economic and Cultural Development of Peoples of the North." The initiative was intended to redress what had been 20 years of a policy vacuum in native affairs since the dissolution of the Committee of the North. However, in practice the decree was overshadowed by a seemingly unrelated resolution introduced by Khrushchev on the strengthening of collective and state farms. The idea was that fewer settlements would mean fewer problems of coordination and distribution.

On North Sakhalin there had already been a series of village closings and kolkhoz relocations following World War II, after Japan relinquished South Sakhalin and the Soviets sought to lay claim to the new territory as quickly as possible. The scourge of the resettlements in the 1960s, however, was that in almost every case when one kolkhoz had to be selected from among many for expansion, the least profitable enterprises on the least profitable sites were chosen. Indeed, the only criteria for selecting which communities to expand and which to close appear to have been proximity to existing regional centers and the consequent ease of administration. But there was a further dimension congruent with the larger goal of reducing the difference between cultural identities across the country. As one Soviet state planner wrote,

The creation of concentrated villages in northern native areas goes hand in hand with the raising of their social and cultural potential, the creation of new forms of housing and the mastery of non-traditional types of work: all this leads to a change in their ethnic self-consciousness. For these national minorities, life in multiethnic, multilingual villages and labor collectives is connected with the need for preserving their "ethnic identity," their roots and their cultural self-respect. In other words, the accelerated development of an international way of life and the transformation of traditional cultures into socialist ones sharpens rather than weakens the need for recognizing the diversity of national cultures.⁷

For many Nivkhi, these latest moves and village closings were the most visible and sobering indication of how much and how quickly their lives had changed. On Sakhalin's northwestern and northeastern coasts, the number of villages lining the shore between 1905 and 1975 dropped by more than 75%.

Across Sakhalin, the resettlement procedure was one of incremental withdrawal. The younger generations were usually the first to accede to the offers of better housing elsewhere, while among the older generations and the hesitant, party

⁷ Anatolii Panteleevich Derevianko and Vladimir Ivanovich Boiko, "Puti kul'turnogo razvitiia Sibiri," in V. I. Boiko, ed., *Kul'tura narodnostei Severa: traditsii i sovremennost'* (Novosibirsk, Nauka, 1986), 11.

members would be obligated to relocate. The school would be moved, thereby forcing parents with children to follow, and then the hospital, then the village soviet, then the post office, then the store, and then the electricity. As one former Nivkh kolkhoz director explained from his home in the new agrocenter, where he lived in 1990,

Of course, people didn't want to leave. Here there isn't the same kind of fish. There you'll find everything. Those that didn't want to go stayed behind. But how can you stay behind if there is no kolkhoz any longer? No school? No store? So you move.

The same story is repeated again and again. A Russian farmer on North Sakhalin began with a list when I asked him about where he used to live.

The 1960s were a turning point for us, when they began the closings. They closed the Shirokopadskii plant. There were five villages in that area and all five were closed. That's five villages that automatically lost their reason for existence. The Khoenskii kombinat was closed, that was another six villages.

Here in the northwest we had the villages of Tuzrik, Viski, Astrakhanovka, Nevel'skaia, Uspenovka, Liugi, Kefi, Naumovka, Grigor'evka, Kalinovka, Valuska, Third Station, Fourth Station, Romanovka, Lupolovo, Tengi, Pogibi . . . and all the rest around there . . . all gone!

Yet, to cast the moves in a roundly negative light would not be accurate. For most of those involved, only in retrospect has the resettlement program come to be so rued. At the time, the plan met with few incidents of overt resistance. Most people interpreted the decision as official policy and assumed that it would be for the best. As one Nogliki resident remarked in 1990, "The tragedy is that nothing happened. The empty houses in Nogliki were all ready. The kolkhoz had already been built. Most people just got up and moved. That's the tragedy—that there was no tragedy."

Indeed, what sets the 1960s resettlements apart from those that immediately followed World War II was the absence of economic virtue. By 1968, Nogliki's newly reconstituted fishery *East* was palpably failing: debt was increasing, plans were not being fulfilled, and the kolkhoz recommended more expeditions further afield, namely, back to the villages of Pil'tun and Chaivo, which had been closed 10 years before.⁸ At both *East* and the northwestern Sakhalin fishery *Red Dawn*, the average fish catches were four times lower than the regional average, while the median kolkhoz salaries were two and a half times lower.⁹ In 1969, when residents of the defunct town of Venskoe complained in a letter to the Sakhalin Regional Executive Committee [*oblispolkom*] that they had been moved involuntarily, the *oblispolkom* claimed otherwise. "People wanted to move to Nogliki immediately," they argued; there was little interest in traditional life, and the authors of the letter, "the majority of whom were elderly and illiterate," did not fully understand its contents. Chuner Taksami,

⁸ GASO f. 53, o. 25, d. 3897a, ll. 101–104.

⁹ Ibid., l. 30.



FIG. 24. Nivkh (Gilyak) students at a parade in Nogliki, Sakhalin Island, 1970. Courtesy of the Sakhalin Regional Museum, Nogliki Branch.

himself an ethnographer, a Nivkh living in Leningrad, and the organizer of the Ven-skoe letter, was chided for his "incorrect, subjective approach . . . which, advocating the preservation of 'northern peoples as children of nature,' was only representing obsolete customs, morals and way of life."¹⁰ The committee's response coincided with the recasting of the broader Soviet nationality policy at that time, whereby Nivkhi were to have bloomed [*rastsveli*], drawn closer to Russian culture [*sblizili*], and finally merged with it [*slili*].¹¹ However, the persistence of expressly Nivkh

¹⁰ Ibid., d. 3897, ll. 4–6.

¹¹ For a discussion of this three-step process, see Yaroslav Bilinsky, "The Concept of the Soviet People and Its Implications for Soviet Nationality Policy," *The Annals of the Ukrainian Academy of Arts and Science in the United States*, no. 37–38 (1980); Gail Warshofsky Lapidus, "Ethnonationalism"; and *Rastsvet i sblizhenie natsii v SSSR* (Moscow: Mysl', 1981). Lapidus is right to point out that by the "time of stagnation" most Soviets had long given up the idea of ethnic merger. What interests me here are the contradictions of a policy that continued to be advocated long after it lost its salience.

cultural forms (language, dress, and diet) underlined the contradictions of the official position: traditional life was at once to be lauded (as a marker of the freedom of peoples) and suppressed (as a lingering resistance to abstract notions of Soviet homogeneity).

The resettlements, rather than representing a merger of collective interests, reduced the Nivkhi to second-class status. In the shuffle of kolkhoz reorganizations, Russians supplanted Nivkhi in the vast majority of skilled and administrative positions. In 1968, despite *East's* status as a Nivkh kolkhoz, only 19% of Nivkhi in the collective worked in skilled positions, and few were being trained for promotion.¹² Figures show that overall kolkhoz membership dropped sharply with the moves, whereas there was a marked increase in unemployment and underemployment for the Nivkh community. Many who were unable to find work in the towns to which they relocated lost their pensions and state benefits. Despite the proposals set forth in Decree No. 300, the new *East* was in disarray. The medical clinic was not being funded, bath facilities were not functioning, and there was no work being done to address growing rates of alcoholism and illiteracy.¹³ Of particular consequence was the introduction of regulations governing the amount of salmon Nivkhi were entitled to catch each year. Through the 1950s, the Nivkh diet was still heavily based on salmon: individuals consumed on the average up to 1000 kg each year (much of it in dried form), an amount far beyond that which could be afforded in local stores. In 1962, an annual limit of 200 kg was imposed, and in 1969, with concern for ever-weakening kolkhoz production, the limit was further reduced to 60 kg. If Nivkhi had joined the Soviet family of nations, it was reasoned, there was no cause for them to be treated exceptionally. In 1963, when the Russian Ministry of Education sent a letter to the Sakhalin *oblispolkom* requesting that they outline their needs for native language education, Iuzhno-Sakhalinsk responded that native languages in the region were not studied due to lack of interest.¹⁴

What made the 1960s resettlements so compelling was not only the attendant drop in quality of living for the indigenous community but the way in which they visually transformed the Sakhalin landscape. Coastlines that were once lined with villages every 10 km became littered with ghost towns. Between 1962 and 1986, the approximately 1000 settlements on all of Sakhalin were reduced to 329.¹⁵ Rather than strengthening and internationalizing, the resettlements produced a spirit of absence felt on economic, social, and personal levels. Rather than moving forward, they generated a retrospective force that pulled many back. The brigadier from Chai-vo remained behind when all of *East* was transferred to Nogliki. By 1970 he was the only one of 700 remaining, and to this day he visits Nogliki only a few months each year. Remaining behind in empty towns that no longer officially existed, he and others like him became icons of a "traditional" way of life that had become reified and reinforced by a policy expressly designed to diminish it. In creating a spatial dichoto-

¹² GASO, f. 53, o. 25, d. 3897, 73.

¹³ Ibid., d. 3897a, ll. 72–78.

¹⁴ Ibid., d. 3584, l. 44.

¹⁵ A. I. Gladyshev, ed. *Administrativno-territorial'noe delenie sakhalinskoi oblasti* (Iuzhno-Sakhalinsk: Dal'nevostochnoe knizhnoe izdatel'stvo, 1986), 79–106, 125.

my between past and present, the resettlements divided allegiances by obliging people to choose (and in most cases making the choice for them).

The fortunes of both *Red Dawn* and *East* continued to decline, with the worsening ecological situation and growing bureaucratic regulations causing a drop in fish catches. Before the collapse of the former Soviet Union, both kolkhozes had "national" status, meaning they received special incentives and allowances as largely indigenous enterprises, but by 1982, Nivkhi comprised only 120 out of the 336 members of *East* and only 127 out of 400 members of *Red Dawn*.¹⁶ In 1980, a further decree, "On Measures for the Further Economic and Social Development of the Peoples of the North," was enacted by the Soviet Council of Ministers. The government spent an enormous amount of money in the implementation of the decree—31.2 billion rubles by 1990, or 169,125 rubles for every indigenous representative in Siberia,¹⁷ over a period when monthly salaries averaged 500 rubles. However, the Nivkh writer Vladimir Sangi, who helped draft the decree, noted ruefully that the funds intended for the cultural and economic development of the Nivkhi were spent by local authorities to purchase oil pipes, automobiles, thousands of pairs of plastic skis, typewriters, calculators and compact toilets.¹⁸

By the late 1980s, the retrospective assessment for Siberian peoples as a whole had little to say for the virtues of internationalization.

The results of sixty years worth of development are not very comforting: from highly qualified reindeer herders, hunters and fishermen, native northerners have been transformed into auxiliary workers, loaders, watchmen and janitors.¹⁹

Public health statistics from recent years indicate the extent to which decades of required self-congratulation obscured considerable problems. In 1988, the life expectancy for Siberian indigenous peoples was 18 years lower than that for the USSR as a whole—45 years for men and 55 years for women. Social problems such as alcoholism and suicide were four to five times as high as in the rest of the country, and few native communities had acquired the trappings of much-advertised convenience: The housing base had changed little since the 1950s; only 3% of native homes had access to gas mains; 0.4% had running water, and only 0.1% were connected to district heating systems.²⁰ By the late 1980s, the population of Sakhalin had grown to 800,000, with Nivkhi making up a diminutive group of some 2200 fishermen, farmers, clerks, and service workers (2800 Nivkhi live on the Amur delta). Yet for all the

¹⁶ Igor' Krupnik and Anna Vasil'evna Smoliak, "Sovremennoe polozhenie korenного naseleniia severa sakhalinskoi oblasti" [dokladnaia zapiska po materialam poezdki s sentiabria 1982 g.] (Moscow: Institute of Ethnography), 7.

¹⁷ Zoia Petrovna Sokolova, "Narody severa SSSR: proshloe, nastoiashchee i budushchee," *Sovetskaiia Etnografiia* 6 (1990), 19.

¹⁸ Aleksandr Ivanovich Pika and Boris Borisovich Prokhorov, "Bol'shie problemy malykh narodov," *Kommunist* 16 (November 1988), 81.

¹⁹ Pika, "Malye narody severa: iz pervobytnogo kommunizma v real'nyi sotsializm," in *Perestroika, Glasnost', Demokratiia, Sotsializm: V chelovecheskom izmerenii* (Moscow: Progress), 306.

²⁰ Ibid.

transformations Nivkhi took part in, their image as the most famous primitives who passed up cave life for Communism is one they encounter still. While I was sitting with a Nivkh family watching television one night in Okha in 1990, a Russian official being interviewed on television in Moscow looked back on the history of Soviet medicine and said, "You have to understand the difficulties posed by a country as diverse as ours. In 1917, Nivkhi were living in caves and Russians were in palaces." The irony that cave life is the first image most Russians have for a group of people who were far more cosmopolitan, far more Asian, and far less isolated geographically *before* Russians arrived to colonize them was rarely noted in popular discourse. Though Nivkhi have never lived the lives of prosaic penury or purity that generations of writers have assigned to them, their long-standing hold on the Russian imagination as the quintessential primitives of pre-Communist life had lost little of its vigor.

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When I first went to Sakhalin Island in 1990, it was 100 years after Shternberg had first arrived. My interests were in wanting to explore the Nivkh experience over the Soviet period, particularly from the vantage point of the state's efforts to colonize, resettle, and, in turn, proletarianize the "primitive Communist" northern peoples that had been at the heart of so much early Soviet social engineering. Despite the fact that Shternberg never wrote on Gilyak Sovietization, his presence was a milestone in conversations about lives past. A constant ritual during my field trips was to begin questions with, "Shternberg once wrote that . . ." or "What do you think Shternberg meant when . . . ?" It was, for myself, one of the few ways in which I could bring to life a seemingly previous Nivkh world recorded at the dawn of the Soviet period, a world that seemed, at least to myself, so alien to Nivkh life at the Soviet period's close.

During the first 6 months I spent on Sakhalin in 1990, my fieldwork charted the retrospection that so many Nivkhi and Russians alike found so absorbing as the USSR was devolving so unexpectedly before their eyes. During a second trip in 1992, the public mood had changed further still, where, by contrast, the past seemed to count only inasmuch as it meant something useful. The Soviet Union had become the Russian Republic, and people were scrambling to secure a position for themselves amidst the political and economic mayhem. On expressly Nivkh fronts, the past played a key role in the way people could regain their former homes. Aided by a decree from Yeltsin, Sakhalin had embarked on a system of "clan plots" for Nivkhi [*rodovye khoziaistva*], whereby Nivkh families could return to areas they once lived in to start up their own fishing and processing enterprises.²¹ In most cases, the tie to clan affiliation was tenuous—the majority of Nivkhi could not identify their clan status, but consulted monographs by Shternberg and later Soviet ethnographers to iden-

²¹ Presidential Decree No. 397, 22 April 1992, "O neotlozhnykh merakh po zashchite mest prozhivaniia i khoziaistvennoi deiatel'nosti malochislennykh narodov Severa," stipulated that free land be allotted on a permanent basis to northern native peoples for traditional land use. Peoples of the north would have a voting role in the distribution of licenses issued on this land for fishing, hunting, and other resource-related pursuits.

tify the leading clan from the village where they or their parents grew up.²² The average allotment was 20 square hectares. Originally the land was intended to be given in perpetuity as private property, but reluctant local officials intervened and leased it on time-limited arrangements. By August 1992, 36 plots had been claimed.²³ Some families had returned to the abandoned village sites of their youth and looked upon the property as subsistence operations for their families. Others sought formal sponsors such as the Sakhalin Geological Trust to make bigger profits. In the latter cases, some had taken out colossal loans of up to 200,000 rubles only to discover by the time the money was disbursed that it was no longer worth as much as they needed. But the enterprises had drawn Nivkh men and women into a form of independent activity they had not known since before World War II. Nivkh friends in Okha, in whose homes I had once spent many long, quiet evenings, had now stepped up the usual barter trading into a frenzy of exchange: 20 kg of fish for two crates of beer, two sacks of sugar for 10 sacks of salt, 1 ton of gasoline for 50 kg of mutton, . . . cars for apartments, refrigerators for motorcycles, a case of vodka for telephone installation, . . . and on and on. At a time when money did not necessarily make someone rich, exchange could.²⁴

In the drive for new clan plots, as in almost all other areas of Nivkh authority, women led the way. If one factor stood out to me the most in thinking of all the changes that had taken place since Shternberg's time on Sakhalin, it was the reversals of fortune in all matters of gender and authority. In local administration, in government, in teaching, and in economic life, Nivkh women consistently held the higher paying jobs and the positions of greater influence. History and demography could explain part of the imbalance: In the 1930s, when the Stalinist juggernaut swept across Sakhalin, officials predominantly targeted Nivkh men as opposed to women for persecution. Nivkh men who had traded widely with Chinese and Japanese entrepreneurs before 1925 became easy targets for the xenophobia sweeping the country; relatively few Nivkh women had entered the Soviet workforce at all before World War II. In 1937 alone, state police liquidated one third of all Nivkh men on Sakhalin's northwestern shore, approximately 200 from a combined population of 1200 men and women.²⁵ One result many decades later is that when I was looking for people who could help think through Shternberg, who knew Nivkh tradition best, I knew few Nivkh men I could ask. Wanting to see how Nivkh friends and colleagues responded to *Social Organization* 100 years later, I mailed copies of a Russian version to eight Nivkh women months before I went to Sakhalin for the summer in 1995.²⁶

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²² The most popular handbooks were Kreinovich's *Nivkhgu* and Anna Smoliak, "Rodovoi sostav nivkhov."

²³ Andrei Vladimirov, "Rodovye khoziaistva: vozvrashchenie k istokam," *Svobodnyi Sakhalin* (9 July 1992), 7.

²⁴ For a look at the role of barter in Siberia during the same period, see Caroline Humphrey, "'Icebergs', Barter, and the Mafia in Provincial Russia," *Anthropology Today* 7, no. 2 (1991), 8–14.

²⁵ Medvedev, "Politiko-ekonomicheskaiia kharakteristika "Rybnovskogo raiona Sakhalinskoi oblasti," GASO ll. 4ob–5ob.

²⁶ The text was from Shternberg, *Sem'ia*.

Russia's economic problems since its reincarnation in 1992 have been well known, and 3 years later, Sakhalin Island, despite its wealth of oil, fish, and timber resources, was no exception. As across Russia, galloping inflation on Sakhalin and the turtlelike pace of most salary increases left huge portions of the population in an almost moneyless circuit of exchange. Most social programs were on the ropes, and the salary lags that began in 1991 continued apace through 1995. Many Nivkh fishermen had not been paid for over 12 months; occasional fish and flour rations were their only compensation. Financial collapse had scuttled new native land use proposals and native trading workshops, but perhaps more indicatively, even many of the best funded projects had foundered on the shoals of mismanagement. A long-awaited road construction project meant to help revive two closed villages on Sakhalin's northwestern shore expired after only 8 of its 22 km had been laid, the rest of the cash lost to theft. In many ways there was nothing new to this: State funds dedicated to the "peoples of the north" have long occasioned feeding frenzies in local Sakhalin offices, as across Siberia and the Russian Far East.²⁷ What seemed different was that the misuse of funds was becoming more open. Hence, for 1994, in Nogliki alone, the district executive council redirected monies that had been committed to indigenous projects, instead, to the building of a city dental clinic, a dormitory at the local hot springs, and a House of Culture for Oil and Railroad Workers.

Money—earned, begged, borrowed, or stolen—was the driving force behind most people's fates, a trend that can be broadly mapped out for most Siberian native peoples in the post-Soviet era. New political platforms abounded while financial and political resources, never broad to begin with, were a fraction of what they once were. In 1995, while one could point to promising local and federal decrees pertaining to Nivkh rights (such as the "Decree of the State Duma on the Critical Economic and Cultural Position of the Numerically Small Indigenous Peoples of the North, Siberia and the Far East of the Russian Federation" or "The Findings of the Committee of the Federation Council for Northern Affairs on the Federal Budget Plan for 1995"), these signaled the idea of an unfunded mandate more than a promise of intent.²⁸ While money continued to support small offices of native affairs scattered around the island, Sakhalin parliamentarians repeatedly blocked the creation of a more streamlined Native Affairs directorate.²⁹

With the play of the free market and the unusually high costs of transport transforming the country, Siberian communities have been among the hardest hit by industries and suppliers no longer impelled by the ideological demands of providing services to the residents of the country's most remote corners. The small coastal settlement of Rybnoe, for example, a town of 250 people where I first based my field research, thrived for decades throughout the Soviet period with a large fishery, a store, a post office, electricity, and a handful of other amenities—though no road to

²⁷ See, for example, Vladimir Sangi in Aleksandr Pika and Boris Prokhorov, "Bol'shie problemy," 76–83.

²⁸ Aleksandr Pika, *Neotraditsionalizm na Rossiiskom Severe* (Moscow: Akademiia Nauk, 1994), 3.

²⁹ B. Osokin, "Programma predpologaet, chinovnik raspologaet . . .," *Sovetskii Sakhalin* (July 27, 1995).

speak of, despite being only 200 km away along flat land from the regional center. Residents regularly took helicopters to do errands in town, and all other necessities came by boat.

Only 5 years later, in 1995, life was radically altered. Because suppliers refused to attend to distant communities, food stores such as the one in Rybnoe folded. Claiming penury, the government closed down phone and postal service except for the most minimal monthly mail deliveries. Schools folded for want of funds, sending Nivkh children back to the centralized boarding school system of *internaty* if they could afford it. In an age of rebuilding, the historical irony observed by many was that this new round of closures was replaying the Brezhnevian relocations gauntlet of the 1960s.

Despite these man-made changes, it was perhaps only through a series of natural disasters that the more trenchant aspects of state collapse became the most apparent. In November 1994, a pounding typhoon swept over northwestern Sakhalin. In Rybnoe, the storm leveled the kolkhoz, the post office, and the day care center, knocking over power lines, washing away the mountain of coal set to heat homes for the winter, and drowning the village's basement food supplies of potatoes and salted salmon. Potatoes immediately became one of North Sakhalin's most expensive commodities, turning almost everyone I knew into consumers of the cheaper instant mashed potato flakes newly available through Korean wholesalers.

Despite the fact that the wooden flotsam of this sea disaster lay everywhere, the government's one form of compensation to the battered coastline was to supply heating oil to all communities. In Rybnoe's case, this lasted until February, when the village *traktorist* unknowingly drove his tanklike all-terrain vehicle over the oil pipes late one night, leaving 85 tons of oil to drain onto the village square and down the beach into the Tatar Strait. As a consequence, almost all of the coastline's 1995 fish catches became heavily tainted by petroleum. To complement the instant potatoes that had replaced North Sakhalin's only vegetable source, the choice of available fish became one of excessively salted or excessively toxic, a choice that had to be made three times daily with some gravity.

Despite receiving humanitarian aid from typhoon-sympathetic Vietnam, consisting primarily of rugs and track suits, which North Sakhalin officials sold in town markets, the coast was in a state of remarkable crisis. We could see in Rybnoe a version of what was happening in much of rural Siberia and the Russian Far East: With no electricity, no transportation, no heating, and no communication, social services folded, stores closed, and schools moved.

The attendant transformations in daily life around the island were manifold. In the capital of Iuzhno-Sakhalinsk, a city of a quarter million, as well as in the regional towns of Nogliki and Okha, the exodus of people back to the mainland was a reminder of how many people had come to the island for the riches of accelerated pensions accrued from jobs in the fishing and oil industries.³⁰ The people who could leave were packing up, but what of the people who couldn't leave?

³⁰ V. Kozyniuk discusses related demographics in, "Ostrova teraiut, materik nakhodit," *Sovetskii Sakhalin* (April 12, 1996), 2.

Rybnoe, diminished to 150 people, was a showcase for the obvious effects of the typhoon. Huge logs lay strewn across the buildings of the fishery. In the main work pavilion, the ventilation system lay crushed, exposed wires lay everywhere, and grass grew from cracks along the walls. As there was no longer a fishery to run, the remaining staff of the kolkhoz relocated their desks to the mayor's office, where, without light, heat, telephone, or a school, the mayor, the mayor's secretary, and the former kolkhoz director, in scenes reminiscent of *Waiting for Godot*, kept daily watch over pots of ink, subscriptions for newspapers rarely delivered, and the occasional sight of neighbors passing by the window.

Young men who once lived for their motorcycles had switched to horses for want of gasoline, and the three horses that had once wandered the shore were constantly in one's field of vision as they drew carts across the main square. Candles, which had risen in price to \$1 each in a community where many had little to live on but tea, potato flakes, and tainted fish, had ceded in popularity to kerosene lamps. The daily experience of crossing the town square was enough to make one feel more like an archaeologist than a pedestrian.

What seemed so profoundly at stake with the loss of the fishing kolkhoz was the dissolution of the state's presence. For a remote community that had been largely self-policing for its 100 years of existence, the figurative and literal collapse of the kolkhoz effectively unraveled a blanket of state protection: It no longer offered technical support for home repairs, transport, and a legion of social services under its aegis, such as the school, day care center, health clinic, library, and dormitory. Likewise, in the larger neighboring towns of Rybnovsk, Nekrasovka, and Moskal'vo, fishing and shipping operations ground to a halt, and the tenor of life was coming to border on suspended animation.

The damage to the northwestern coast was enough to move most of the Nivkhi I knew to a ponderous mood, but the key event that was occurring around each of the interviews here was a much starker one. Eight months after the typhoon, shortly after my own arrival in May, some 2100 people in the North Sakhalin town of Neftegorsk (population 3000) died overnight in a jarring 7.5 earthquake. Two weeks of efforts to relieve survivors took place amidst looting and the widespread theft of corpses, which were taken in order to qualify for funeral monies for lost family members.³¹ The traffic in other people's remains and the ensuing mayhem evoked scenes from Gogol's *Dead Souls*. To put an end to the confusion, the government soon donated the town's remaining buildings and plowed over the land, leaving empty fields 5 weeks after the quake. If Nivkhi and Russians on North Sakhalin were expecting little redress for their problems before June of that year, they were expecting even less thereafter.

What the earthquake had laid bare was something many people on the island already recognized—a state apparatus increasingly less interested in lives of its residents. It seemed in the briefest way to crystallize the process that had been taking

³¹ *Sakhalinskii Neftianik*, May 29–June 8, 1995, *passim*. Igor Marzhetto summarizes the problems related to distribution of compensation in, "Neftegorsk krichal troe sutok," *Argumenty i Fakty* 25, no. 766 (June 1995), 5.

place across Siberia and the Russian Far East, that easterly nether zone to which so many Soviets of all nationalities, decades earlier, had been recruited to build a new frontier. After decades of the most concerted efforts to settle Sakhalin as quickly as possible, building it to a population of 800,000 by 1989, the government had changed its mind. People had to go. On May 31st, 3 days after the Neftegorsk collapse, Deputy Prime Minister Oleg Soskovets arrived to survey the damage and assert a federal presence. On television and in print interviews, he announced to local residents, "Clearly this part of the country is not fit for human habitation In the government, we are looking into every effort to transform North Sakhalin's economy onto a shift regime [*vakhtovyi metod*] in order to give priority to resource development."³² Only 4 years previously the government had still been aggressively courting newcomers.

Thinking about Soskovets' pronouncement, I remembered Marx's line from *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, charting early capitalism's first realization about its constituents—that there are, in short, too many:

Needlessness as the principle of political economy is most brilliantly shown in its theory of population. There are too many people. Even the existence of men is considered a pure luxury; and if the worker is ethical, he will be sparing in procreation.³³

In an ominous turn for the Sakhalin economy, what became clear was the government's decision that the local population, which it had so ardently recruited, now constituted a hindrance to free market principles and resource harvesting. There were too many people who expected too much.

Speaking to people across the island, I realized that the policy had been in effect for much of 1995. While salaries had not been paid in most cases for 3–6 months, anyone could receive their entire docket of back pay when they handed in their resident permits [*propiski*] with the promise of leaving. And so, within a month of the earthquake, in the regional town of Okha, 50 km away from what remained of Neftegorsk, over 1000 of the town's population of 30,000, spurred by fear, faith, and finance, forfeited their residence permits and returned to the mainland.

In a strikingly grim atmosphere, Nivkhi I knew often greeted this situation with some irony, joking, "Well look, we don't have anywhere to go. This means we'll have more room." But for their own part, prospects for improving the lives of the island's residents, alleviating ethnic discrimination, or entrenching a federalist sentiment in this far corner of the state held little of their original promise from 5 years previous. The level of disaffection with the central government amidst these shifts would be difficult to overestimate. But it also goes a certain way toward explaining a daily language where worlds receded, from Gilyak pasts to Soviet pasts and the moments where they met in conjuncture, fed conversation.

³² ITAR-TASS, in *Sakhalinskii Neftianik* (June 1, 1995), 1.

³³ Karl Marx, *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* (New York: International Publishers, 1964), 152.

I. RIMA PETROVNA KHAILOVA AND ZOIA IVANOVNA LIUTOVA³⁴

Nekrasovka, June 5, 1995

The working session with Rima Petrovna Khailova and Zoia Ivanovna Liutova took place in the North Sakhalin town of Nekrasovka, one of the four main agrocenters to which the government relocated Sakhalin Nivkhi in the 1960s. The Nivkh writer Vladimir Sangi once described Nekrasovka as Sakhalin's premier "Potemkin village," in the tradition of exemplary show towns that lined the route of Catherine the Great every time she traveled between Moscow and St. Petersburg. (When the Canadian Northern Affairs minister visited Nekrasovka on an official tour in 1985, Sakhalin officials used huge tarpaulins to cover more than a dozen crumbling buildings on the main street to keep them from view.) Khailova lives in Nekrasovka, editing the small Nivkh language monthly newspaper, *Nivkh Dif*. Zoia Ivanovna Liutova ran the Nekrasovka library before retiring in 1993. The conversation had begun with talk of the Neftegorsk earthquake.

GRANT: Since we are covering maudlin topics like Neftegorsk, why not take one moment from Shternberg's text, about suicide. In [*Social Organization*] we get examples of the suicide of lovers who had transgressed the rules of marriage. Did that ever happen in your lifetime, or was it something that your parents talked about?

KHAILOVA: You know . . . in my own family, I lost my oldest brother when he committed suicide at age 17. My parents said later that it was probably unrequited love, but I thought that it was just because there were no girls for him to marry. But I was only 6 at the time. This was all told to me later.

Right, he shot himself. It was in the spring, in May. He shot himself in the school, the *internat* [state boarding school]. My father had to go up to fetch him—he took the dog sled since there was still snow then. Today we look upon 17 year-olds as teenagers, but then he would have been an adult. He was already hunting and was familiar with guns. He would take care of the dogs, and have things to do around the house. He could have married.

There are women who commit suicide, so many young people do today. One of my cousins, in the 1950s, was a little off. He went down into the basement of his house and slit his wrists. No, wait, he shot himself. My relatives mostly seem to shoot themselves. It's such a horrible matter. This was so long ago and I've since grown up, but I remember it all so clearly. The village council office wouldn't even let us put a marker over the grave, or bury him along with everyone else in the general cemetery. Even Soviet officials have their superstitions!

GRANT: There was one incident in [Shternberg's] manuscript recalling a fellow who had not been properly buried by Nivkh tradition, and exacted a revenge on his living relatives for not having taken care of him properly. [Our common acquaintance] Shura told me about one fellow who was working on an oil rig in the taiga a few years

³⁴ Each of the interviews here was conducted in Russian. I have edited out sections for brevity but have retained the sequence of the discussions. Vertical spaces indicate a break in the interviews, or simply a change of subject.

ago, Sergei-someone. A helicopter dropped him off at his site, but it turns out they had left him in the wrong place, and he was never found again.

LIUTOVA: Vykhtin.

GRANT: Shura was helping me read the text aloud to work on the translation, and when we got to that part she turned white. Apparently in the year after he got lost in the taiga, his older brother drowned, and his father had a heart attack.

KHAILOVA: I can't tell you about that case, because we truly don't know what happened to Sergei. But, at the same time, of course, it surprised her. What do we know about Shternberg in the first place? What do we know about ourselves? I remember when she phoned me to say that you had mailed her a copy of [the Shternberg] book. I said "Great, let's make copies," because we have never read these things before. We would sooner be able to tell you the finer points of Russian history than something about Nivkh legends.

* * * * *

GRANT: I want to talk about spirits for a moment. Shternberg refers to them throughout the text as almost self-evident forces in Nivkh life. On eastern Sakhalin they are called *milk* and [here] on western Sakhalin they're called *kinz*. So who are *kinz*, and what do they do?

LIUTOVA: I remember so often when we were young. My parents would say, "*Kinz* are coming," and we would be so scared. They would scare us all the time.

KHAILOVA: Well, scared or not scared, the important thing was that you were supposed to conduct yourself properly so that you didn't bother the *kinz*. You know, if someone was sitting there who you couldn't see, or when you went into the forest, you would know that there would be a *kinz* there.

LIUTOVA: Or for example, children couldn't play near the water, where *kinz* also live, since that could be dangerous.

GRANT: Do you still tell your own children or grandchildren not to play near the *kinz*?

LIUTOVA: Don't forget, we've become atheists!

GRANT: Sure, but people all around the world say those kinds of things to their children in order to keep them out of trouble.

KHAILOVA: Right, and we do the same in Russian with Russian fairy tales. But there is an important idea that not everyone passes on to their children, and this is that all of nature has its own master. It's all gotten mixed up with the larger idea of there once being four Masters (*yz*), you know, of the water, and the hills, and the sky, and fire. Most often their influence is felt in a negative way—that if you trouble them, they will trouble you—but it doesn't have to be negative. The idea of a *kinz* is a simple one: Every living thing has its spirit, and that people live there. If you see your child striking a bush, you can say, "There are people living there, let them be." Better still, you feed the bush, or the fire, or the water; you go back in the evening and leave them an offering.

GRANT: What reasons would there be for *kinz* to strike out at someone?

KHAILOVA: In what sense? I mean, there are different kinds of rituals. For carelessness toward the sea, or when you're in the forest, or even with the earthquake from last week. My first reaction [to the earthquake] was, "Maybe we've done something." So I got up the next day and got my neighbor Svetlana and said, "Let's go into the forest." It was early in the morning. We went out and went behind the building into the brush and, you know, fed the land with food and tobacco. Meanwhile, there were Russian women on their way to work in their vegetable gardens. There's the difference between us!

When I went to Neftegorsk [the earthquake zone] a few days ago, I did the same thing. I went to a quiet untouched place and left an offering for the land. The land has obviously suffered terribly in ways we don't even know. It's deeply ingrained in our blood that one must do this wherever you go, especially in a new place. I did it for the land and for the people who had died, but you also do it for your children and their children, for the people who will follow after you so that they will be welcomed there as well.

GRANT: I was so taken aback when I read about the master of thunder who lives at the bottom of the Tatar Strait around Pogibi. People there tell you all the time about the famously brutal project Stalin organized, for a tunnel to be dug underneath the strait to connect the island to the mainland. The strait is only 7 km wide between Pogibi and Lazarev. The crews got almost halfway over from each side, 3 km from each shore, and then one day, "Boom." There was this enormous explosion and it all caved in. Imagine that moment.

KHAILOVA: They woke him up.

About *kinz*, I could try it a different way. At home when I was growing up, there were so many difficult times. Once my older sister tried to hang herself. She had gone into the forest, and my mother simply started to feel that something was strange. My sister was married and had two children and had gone with the children into the forest. So my mother went after her, and found my sister already hanging there, but she was still alive. She cut her down and brought her home and everything. Then they cut down the tree and sawed it right off at the base. And the path to the tree they blocked off so that she wouldn't be able to return there easily. When she wanted to even move in that direction she had trouble physically moving her legs. And my mother said, "That's the *kinz* scaring her away from there." So you see, *kinz* can also protect you from things, even if they frighten you.

GRANT: Do you know why she wanted to kill herself?

KHAILOVA: What can you say? Things weren't going that well with her husband. They had been separated. He was working not that far away on another kolkhoz, cutting hay. It was only 12 km away, but that was still a few hours' walk then. He came by to check on her after the accident, but she was already better by then.

GRANT: How do you figure out that [*kinz*] are there?

KHAILOVA: That brings us back to how you raise children. Maybe my mother was just afraid of what else could have happened at [my sister's suicide attempt]. I think of *kinz* as a way of keeping people from wreaking havoc all around.

GRANT: Like an autocensorship?

KHAILOVA: Sure, but I'm getting us off track. I mean, *kinz* still exist. I remember one time when there was a man that drowned. It was up by the fish station in Rybnovsk. This man who had been working on the pier drowned, and no one could find him. Then, someone saw a shadow far off by a track of water on the beach, and they found this man up against a bush, half underwater, washed up on shore from the night before. And everyone said that it was his *tiang*—that's not quite a *kinz*, but specifically the spirit of someone who has died—people said that it was his *tiang* that made it possible for us to find him. When people saw the shadows the old sailors said that we should look over there, and they found him.

GRANT: Were there other moments in your family where people spoke about the specific influences of the dead?

KHAILOVA: Well this wasn't even so much the influence of the dead, because it was the sea that really made it possible for people to find him, by washing him up on shore. But it was his *tiang* that enabled people to find him.

I had one experience personally, when I was younger, and we lived on the edge of the village, right by the forest. It was a lot like Romanovka, or even Rybnoe, where it's all flat, and the forest just starts. I was out collecting berries near the house, and I saw a woman in the distance. I got right up close to her, maybe 10 m away, and the closer I got to her, the more my hair started to stand on end. She looked at me, with these black eyes, and I thought, I don't know her. Eventually I went in a different direction and she fell away. When I went home I told my mother about her. My mother asked what she looked like, and when I described her, she turned pale. She told me to go back to the forest and make an offering to appease this woman who had once lived in the village but had died years before.

There are legions of these kinds of things. I had another experience when my father died. We had moved here, to Nekrasovka, and he appeared to me all the time in my dreams, making me travel with him. I had been in Leningrad when he died. I was studying there, and I came back for the funeral. When I first saw him [in my dreams] after his death, when he first started calling to me, I felt that it was just because I had been upset. But then when I went back to Leningrad, not more than a week later, he started appearing in my dreams again. And he would come to me, and take me outside, and make me go all around Leningrad with him. I was sleeping, but I was also with my father, and it was exhausting me. And he would say, "Well daughter, wait for me tomorrow." And then I would wake up. Eventually that stopped. I just figured that I had gone crazy. But then I moved back to Sakhalin at the end of the year, and he started appearing to me again. He would arrive on his sled and we would race across the taiga all night long. We would go and go.

I knew that my mother was a bit of a shaman. So I said to her, "Mama, help me out. He is always taking me away night after night and I'm tired."

GRANT: Was this just when you were sleeping or was it when you were awake sometimes as well?

KHAILOVA: Just in dreams. Just in dreams. My mother went into her bedroom and was probably in there for 20 minutes. I have no idea what she did, but when she came



FIG. 25. The Sakhalin northwestern coast fishing village of Rybnovsk, seen from the air, 1990. Courtesy of Douglas Vogt.

out she said, "He won't bother you any more." And you know, to this day, I see him only very rarely.

GRANT: And in the dreams, he would talk to you as well?

KHAILOVA: He would talk to me, about all kinds of things, and travel around. I loved him very much. My parents had married late and he was older by the time I was born.

GRANT: He was probably very devoted to you.

KHAILOVA: He was very loving. He had died suddenly, but just before he died he managed to say, "Don't forget Rima." They might not have called for me because Leningrad was so far away and it cost so much money—today it costs the earth, but even then it was a lot of money—and I took a train back, through Aleksandrovsk. I couldn't come to the funeral, because that would have taken too long, a week or more, but I came back in the summer when they were fencing off the grave, you know, in the Soviet way. They brought me to the grave, gave me a hammer and a post, and told me to drive the post in for the fence. I asked, "Why?" and they said that everyone had to help build this fence, or this house for the deceased. So that, there, he would have his own place to live, and would leave the rest of us in peace.

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GRANT: Here's another subject from the manuscript: What about tying nettle bracelets around the wrists of young girls when they are pledged in proper kin marriage to boys? Was that something you ever saw or heard about?

KHAILOVA: That's hard to say. I myself was pledged in marriage as a young girl, but no one ever tied anything to my wrist or marked it in a way that I noticed. When I grew

up, I couldn't stand to be around the boy I was supposed to marry! It was already the Soviet era by then: I could see that there were all different kinds of people around me and that I had a choice of who I could marry. My mother said, "Listen, your father has already made an agreement. He received gifts [bride-price], they gave him expensive knives and everything. It's been decided, and that's that." So time got closer, and I was studying. I was in high school. And my mother said, "Well, it's time," and I said, "Mama, what are you talking about? Don't you think I can find someone for myself?" And my mother said, "But this is so awkward. Your father's already agreed." So I said, "Well if they've agreed then they can disagree." And the most interesting thing is, no one resisted when I said no. The other parents never did take back their presents, and they always asked after me. Finally their son got married, and I thought, "Thank God!"

GRANT: So they exchanged knives and . . . ?

KHAILOVA: Knives, and something else, I can't remember . . . I was a trade object too!

GRANT: Your parents didn't resist when you decided not to marry along kin lines, but had they followed the same rules themselves a generation earlier?

KHAILOVA: You might not believe this, but my mother had first been married off to a very old man (my father was her second husband). Her family had pledged her to another family and simply gave her over to them. She must have been so young, since she remembered not being able to even reach up to the table when she first lived there. Eventually she grew up and the older man married her.



FIG. 26. In the fishing village of Rybnovsk on Sakhalin's northwestern shore, the Nivkh couple Vera Kekhan (left) and her husband Konstantin (right, background) continue to keep a team of dogs though they no longer have a dog sled. 1990. Courtesy of Douglas Vogt.

GRANT: Did she know this other family at all when she moved in there?

KHAILOVA: How could she have known them? She was too little. She said she cried all the time and wanted to go home. They let her go back home to her parents sometimes, but she lived with her new husband's family. It was a formal agreement. She eventually married him and had four children with him. Then he died in 1940, when she was still young. And then after the war she married my father. But that was such a different generation: Women were so much meeker then.

GRANT: Do you know any people in your own generation who considered clan status before they married?

KHAILOVA: Now? I can't think of anyone. But before?

LIUTOVA: Everyone knew who they were supposed to marry, even if they didn't end up marrying them.

KHAILOVA: There were rules

LIUTOVA: And prohibitions

KHAILOVA: It's only now that people feel they have to fall in love. Before, you just had to like the person a little, and you'd think to yourself, "Well, it's not so terrible. We'll work something out." I had a cousin once, Raisa, and I used to tell her, "Raisa, if you were a boy, we would be married." And we would tease each other, but in fact, it was a big problem for a lot of people because sometimes there wasn't anyone who you could marry according to clan rules.

GRANT: Was there a strong sense when you were growing up that you belonged to a specific clan, and that your friends belonged to others?

KHAILOVA: You mean, the kinship system? Of course, how could you not?

GRANT: How did it manifest itself?

KHAILOVA: Even now we know who everyone in the village is, who comes from what clan. When we were growing up it was like code when our parents referred to our "closest" relatives, who we should spend our time with, and so on. And even my children

GRANT: Would it please you if your children married according to clan rules today?

KHAILOVA: No, now it's all over. We've all become Russified, you know. I have a Russian son-in-law now—what am I supposed to do?

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GRANT: The text also talks about cases of men having more than one wife, as well as women having more than one husband, or at least a lover. Is that something you've encountered?

KHAILOVA: Polygamy? There were cases when older men had two wives; I never heard of anyone having more than that. About women having more than one husband, I've never heard anything.

GRANT: Or at least, women having more than one lover and not being held in contempt for it?

LIUTOVA: Well, what can you say, people probably did that then as now, in secret, but you wouldn't say that they were respected for it. It would not be encouraged. Women like that were thought of as . . . crafty.

In our family, one of our cousins was left without a husband or a father, and so my father took her into our family. The other children thought it was polygamy, but for our family, it was like a responsibility to take in a relative. She was the wife of his younger brother, and so, it was accorded by law.

KHAILOVA: It was the same with the aunt I told you about. She had no children. And you probably know that fellow Pogiun in Romanovka . . .

GRANT: Vasia Pogiun?

KHAILOVA: Right, Vasilii. He had two wives. My aunt was his older wife, his first. They brought in his second wife Lida when his first wife couldn't have any children. And Lida gave birth to a whole bunch of them. And my aunt . . .

GRANT: Was that Katia? Wasn't she a shaman?

KHAILOVA: Aunt Katia. She died years and years ago. She considered it all to be perfectly normal. The children called her "Mama," and she treated them as her own. They still talk about her all the time today.

In our family, there was a time when my cousin died. He left behind a whole lot of children, and we already had a large family. My father came to my mother and said, "We should go take in his wife and children." My mother agreed, but while my father was at home asking my mother, another brother arrived and married her, and then he gave away his own wife to another brother. Didn't I mention this to you before?

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GRANT: What about times when someone just had a lot of money, and was able to offer a high bride-price?

LIUTOVA: I never heard of anything like that.

KHAILOVA: Apart from Aunt Lida, there aren't very many examples.

GRANT: What about the idea of wealthy Nivkhi in general? The Soviet literature made so much of the idea of rich and poor among northern peoples, that it indicated a class struggle.

KHAILOVA: People say that my mother came from a wealthy family.

GRANT: How could you tell?

LIUTOVA: Anyone who was a successful hunter had more money than others. Anyone who had a lot of fish, or a lot of dogs, a lot of alcohol.

KHAILOVA: You're describing a kulak!

GRANT: What did your mother say about her own childhood that way?

KHAILOVA: My mother used to tease my father, "Look at what a poor sod you are! Look what a low family you came from! What am I doing here?" And my father would say, "You came from a rich family, and where's the money?" But they say that my mother's father was a merchant trader, that he had a lot of furs, and dogs too.



FIG. 27. Konstantin Agniun hunting outside Romanovka, Sakhalin Island, 1990. Courtesy of Douglas Vogt.

LIUTOVA: When a woman married into a family, she was supposed to arrive in a fox fur

KHAILOVA: And at least a few formal dresses. The furs, the iron kettle, it was all part of the package.

GRANT: Both in this text and in other works by Shternberg, there is mention even of slaves.

KHAILOVA: People had their own workers, to be sure. But it was more a question of very poor people who would come to live in the homes of their wealthier relatives.

GRANT: Did you hear of any in your mother's family?

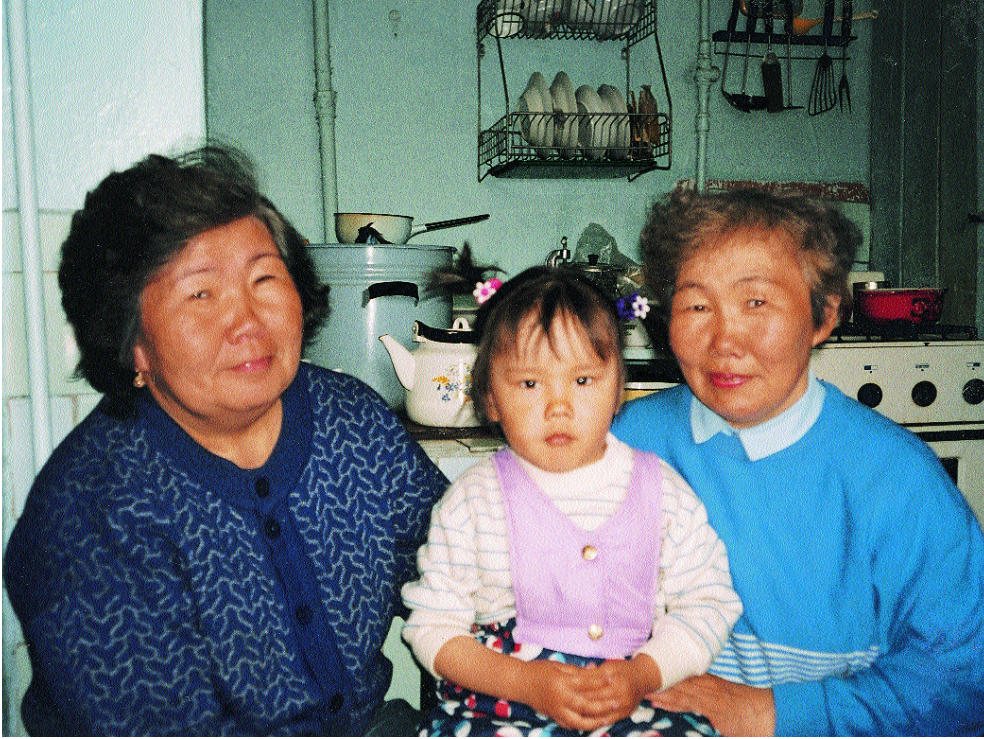


FIG. 28. Rima Khailova and Zoia Liutova, with Liutova's granddaughter in Nekrasovka, Sakhalin Island, 1995. Photographed by Bruce Grant.

KHAILOVA: My mother never mentioned it. I read about it in *Shternberg*! My father was an orphan, so he never could talk about his family. But, rather than the pre-Soviet period, think of the post-Soviet period. There are so many cases now of poor people going to live with their relatives, ostensibly as guests, but really as domestic workers, nothing more and nothing less. That happens with Nivkhi and with Russians.

GRANT: Helping around the house sounds more diplomatic than saying slavery.

KHAILOVA: Sure, and if they were paid, it might differ also. There are a few cases in Nekrasovka of people hiring their own servants even today. But that's different. I mean, that's only since the country has collapsed.

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GRANT: When you referred to Baba Olia at one point when you were talking yesterday, you said that she is *imk* to you because she is the wife of your uncle. And technically, *imk* also signifies mother. Was it something like that?

KHAILOVA: Uh huh.

GRANT: So, in the Nivkh language, is there a word that signifies one's birth mother, to differentiate?

KHAILOVA: Well, it's the same word, but of course it depends on how it is used. It can go one way or the other. Sure, everyone knows who their mother is, but it's not

a transgression of rules to use the same term for someone else. It's like when my cousin took his brother's widow as wife, his children could call her mother too. Here, my uncle is my mother's brother and I call his wife *imk* because it follows along the woman's side. Moreover, I don't have a mother anymore, so I call her mother.

GRANT: And for that she will always make sure you get a portion of *mos'*.³⁵

KHAILOVA: Oh, that's only because I tease her. But I do bring her things every time I collect berries or collect fiddleheads. Shura doesn't like to spend a lot of time picking berries, and I know that Baba Olia likes them.

GRANT: [to Liutova] And so, she's *nanakh* to you?

LIUTOVA: By my mother she is *nanakh*. My mother was married to her older brother. So to my mother she is *nakh*, and to me she is *nanakh*.

GRANT: So, then *nakh* means . . . ?

LIUTOVA: The little sister of your husband. Or little sister generally. For example, you're married, and your wife has a little sister . . . Wait, let me figure this out. It's so confusing.

KHAILOVA: For example, a sister-in-law can call her husband's sister *nakh*.

LIUTOVA: Therefore Baba Olia is *nakh* to my mother, because her brother married my mother, and because I am my mother's daughter, I call her *nanakh*.

GRANT: So what do you call her more often, *nanakh*, or Baba Olia?

LIUTOVA: Hmm. I say *nanakh* more often, but I say both.

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GRANT: A history question, from the pre-Soviet period, from the time of hunger and epidemics: Shternberg mentions that the famines and confusion brought on by displacement by Russians led to the lack of marriageable relatives. Hence, the downfall of the system of marriage rules. Did your parents ever talk about this?

KHAILOVA: They talked about periods of hunger, but never of an entire village, for example, dying off, just cases of hunger among a few families. It was more often a case of people not having prepared enough for the wintertime.

LIUTOVA: My mother told me about when they had epidemics of scurvy that a lot of people died from it, but she never mentioned anything specific.

KHAILOVA: It's almost hard to imagine. I mean, things must have been bad since it seems impossible to picture even one family going hungry in a village when others had food. When I was growing up in Romanovka, I can hardly remember the number of families my father would help feed. Families didn't always set aside enough for the winter, usually. My father was a good hunter, and he could always help people get more to eat. He worked on the cutter boats too and had a good salary. It would be inconceivable to imagine one family going hungry while others had enough. People were always coming by for something, for flour here or seal fat there. We kept a cow and would often give away the milk. She would bring food to all the older women who couldn't walk anymore. I was a little girl and would help her.

³⁵ *Mos'* is a traditional Nivkh aspic prepared from seal fat, fish skin, and berries.

GRANT: The rules of hospitality among Nivkhi are famous in all the literature. Do you think that they have changed much over time?

KHAILOVA: They've changed. Of course, they've changed. We're a completely different people today. I can't even remember an occasion when my mother looked at someone's house and said, "Look at how dirty everything is!" Or if she did, she would be the first to offer to help them out and start washing the walls.

GRANT: It reminds you of that famous moment in Kreinovich's book (1973), when he walks into a woman's house in Chir-Unvd in the 20s. Everyone in the house is ill with tuberculosis, but the wife is embarrassed by the dirt and disorder. She wants to offer him tea, so spits into a cup to clean it out. He is too polite to refuse, and has tuberculosis for the rest of his life!

KHAILOVA: Kreinovich was one of the few who didn't exaggerate so much about Nivkhi. When you read Engels or Shternberg, they write as if group sex was the most common thing going, that any woman would have sex with any of her husband's brothers, whereas for us it seems impossible to believe it could apply to any generation past or present.

GRANT: Engels in particular was happy that he had found a group that corresponded to his ideas of primitive Communism. People who conducted themselves freely and without guilt, people who had morality . . . but not monogamy.

LIUTOVA: That kind of freedom, of course, never existed. At least not as a general framework.

KHAILOVA: Still, people can do anything in secret. Like in Rybnoe . . . [they laugh].

LIUTOVA: In Rybnoe there is a spot with an old Nivkh name that means, more or less, "place where you can make love in secret"! Down past the fish station.

KHAILOVA: That's all that people can do now there anyway, rebuild the clan. Few people would have guessed only a few years ago that even the clan plots would be better off than half of the towns on the island. So many towns have been closed in the last few years alone. No roads, no gasoline, no stores. It's awful.

GRANT: A more piquant question: Shternberg wrote about both hermaphrodites and homosexuality.

KHAILOVA: There have been hermaphrodites, at least. I remember one young girl who was taken back and forth to Moscow countless times for operations. As far as homosexuals go, we've never heard of any examples; for us it has always been a great sin, probably. I think that it happens in more civilized worlds.

LIUTOVA: We must still be an ancient people. We haven't got to that yet.

GRANT: Or at least people discussed it less.

KHAILOVA: I told you earlier, I think, that my father had been head of the village council when I was growing up. Everything that took place went through him—he was the local tsar at times it seemed. He would tell my mother things and then sometimes she would pass them on to us. I know that there were a number of sexual incidents brought on by Russians from the local prison.

LIUTOVA: But that again is a question of a different epoch and civilization. In older Nivkh times, it wasn't anything that people talked about.

GRANT: The idea in Shternberg was that Nivkhi looked on these things more easily than others.

LIUTOVA: It may also have been a case of just being afraid of anyone born differently. Any time anyone was born with an extra finger, or with any physical differences, people went out of their way to treat them specially, to treat them well, in case that they might have some special powers. People felt that if someone was born differently there must be a reason. It was the same thing with twins—two bodies but just one soul—before people used to sacrifice one at birth because they didn't know what to do. Later they didn't kill them, but they would give them gifts because they were, in some way, uncertain about them.

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GRANT: There's a moment in the text where they write about a wedding, where in the course of the ceremony, someone steps into an iron kettle, first a large one, then a smaller one.

LIUTOVA: The iron kettles symbolize the parents' agreement over the marriage. If they all want the marriage to take place, then they would exchange kettles. I think it was in Shternberg where he wrote that Nivkhi put small rocks into each pot. What do you call those tiny rocks in Russian?

KHAILOVA: Cornelian.

LIUTOVA: Cornelian. But this is all from what I read. No one ever told us about it.

GRANT: So there were no kettles when the two of you got married?

LIUTOVA: In the village soviet? Go on! We're the new generation.

KHAILOVA: For us, getting married cost 3 rubles 50 kopecks. But then again, the husband always paid. I guess that's its own kind of bride-price.

GRANT: Did your parents organize any kind of dowry for you when you got married?

LIUTOVA: Oh, something very modern. I had already been working and was independent. I had received my own apartment from the kolkhoz. My mother gave me a bed set: a mattress, a pillow, and a blanket and some kitchen things. Maybe there was a kettle in there somewhere!

KHAILOVA: Along with that, my mother left me a beautiful ring. When my daughter got married I wanted to do the same thing. Now people give whatever they can. There are some New Russians³⁶ that give their daughters entire European villas!

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GRANT: I wanted to ask about the idea that Nivkhi didn't address each other formally when they came or went, that there were no words of greeting or departure. I find this so hard to picture. Is that really how it worked?

³⁶ "New Russians" is the term most commonly used for the new moneyed elite in post-Soviet Russia.

LIUTOVA: Like in soap operas: People would just walk in and immediately start saying something profound!

KHAILOVA: But that's really what people did. When someone walked in your house, you had a whole ritual. Especially if the visitor was a respected person, let's say a woman. The hostess would offer a pipe and the two women would smoke together, and only then could the woman ask how her visitor had arrived there, and what news she had heard. I remember when we first moved here, to our new apartment, one of the older Nekrasovka women came to visit my mother. She was a very elderly woman, because she was older than my mother and my mother was 72 at the time. They both started smoking, though these were cigarettes, not the kind of *Belomorkanal* plug cigarettes, but the better ones. They shared one. My mother would take a puff and then the woman took a puff. And I kept looking in, I kept wondering what they were doing. The older woman spoke in the Schmidt Peninsula dialect, while my mother spoke the coastal Amur dialect, but you know, they're similar. She was a very beautiful woman and spoke in a formal manner. And then before she left, without a word, she took out some small fish she had brought for my mother, and made her a gift. My mother just smiled, and then she left. And I kept thinking how strange this was. I asked my mother what kind of fish it was, and it turned out that neither of us knew.

LIUTOVA: When my mother would have older guests, the visitors would always use these very slow, dramatic gestures. They would take these long puffs on cigarettes, silently, and with great drama. And then they would lift their glass of tea and drink it very slowly, also in silence. It was as if it was a sign of respect to be very careful.

GRANT: All in silence?

KHAILOVA: It is such a funny image I have from my childhood. My mother's women guests would sit on the floor with their legs completely outstretched, silently smoking. I kept thinking, "What are they waiting for?"

GRANT: So let's back up. This older woman would walk into the house, and, if she didn't say anything, would she smile?

KHAILOVA: Naturally.

LIUTOVA: Or maybe not. If it was the first time they were meeting, they would each be very reserved. It would be a very short, polite smile. But if they knew each other well, they would smile broadly. So she would walk in, they wouldn't say anything, they would sit down, and then be silent.

GRANT: It sounds lovely, though maybe also difficult.

LIUTOVA: Then they would start to smoke, also in silence. And then after they had smoked, the hostess would ask the guest where they came from, maybe from another village, what was going on there, and so on. Usually they would find a mutual acquaintance to talk about.

KHAILOVA: Everyone was so connected to everyone else then by all the marriage rules that it wasn't hard to figure out how each of you belonged somehow to the other.

LIUTOVA: Exactly. You talk and talk and before you know it you find out that you are close relatives!

GRANT: What if people were really close friends, and they knew each other really well? Would they still not say anything when they walked in? They wouldn't say some kind of hello?

KHAILOVA: Nivkhi tell jokes all the time when they are with their friends. All Nivkhi love to play tricks on each other. So when my parents' really close friends would come over, they would walk in, still in silence, but then when they sat down, they would immediately start to tease each other, like pretend that they were in the wrong house, or pretend that they were different people.

It all changed so quickly, that it's hard to say it was one way or the other. Around the same time, after we moved to Nekrasovka, Aunt Katia, the woman I told you about before, came to stay with us. She was so taken aback when she went into the store. She came back and said, "What do all these strange people in Nekrasovka think? I walked into the store and no one asked me who I was or where I came from." So it wasn't as if people didn't talk to each other, as if silence was more important than talking. We used to sit around all day and talk.

GRANT: Shternberg also said that this formality, this sense of distance was built into the Nivkh language in many ways. For example, instead of saying to someone directly, "Where have you come from?" people might say, "Where has the Gilyak come from?" Is that something people you know still use, speaking to each other in the third person instead of the second?

LIUTOVA: Hmm. That sounds funny to me. I haven't heard of that. Have you heard of that?

KHAILOVA: I mean, people could say it. It would be strange.

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GRANT: I remember reading in the book how brothers and sisters were not supposed to address each other directly in conversation, for special ritual reasons. I understood the formal logic to it when I read about it, but it's another thing to try and imagine. I mean, here are brother and sister growing up in the same house, and they weren't meant to talk to each other, or joke with each other?

LIUTOVA: My father and his sister never talked with each other. I mean, they could exchange information like, "I'm going to bed now," or "I am going to work." But they never had conversations. They just didn't.

KHAILOVA: Generally women just talked to women and men talked to men. It's only now that morals have changed so much that we talk with whoever we might happen to be with, such as a brother. When I grew up with the boys, the children from my mother's first marriage, it wasn't formally forbidden to speak to each other, but you knew that you weren't supposed to. It was nothing like children who talk to their older siblings today. I did everything within the bounds of what was normal. It also depended on age: With the younger brothers I was a little closer, but with my older brother I was very strictly reserved. I hardly acknowledged him unless I had to.

GRANT: And the whole idea is that women would eventually be part of a different clan, once they married, and were therefore more distant?

KHAILOVA: No, I don't think so. I mean, I don't know why. That's just how people acted. In general, the men were raised by males and the girls spent time with their mothers. My mother would always say, "Don't concern yourself with the boys' affairs."

LIUTOVA: Taboo.

KHAILOVA: In general the rules prohibited women from all kinds of things.

GRANT: Even when everyone was sitting with their legs stretched straight out in front of them?

KHAILOVA: Exactly. As if you're supposed to fly or something. All around the house they kept guns and bows and arrows. It wasn't just that you weren't supposed to touch them, if you ever stepped over a gun, you couldn't imagine the fuss. All kinds of things were considered sinful. On the other hand, we were asked to make the bullets. When you make them yourself you start out with these tiny little squares of metal, and then you have to cut them back to make them round. It's the most picky, boring work, so obviously the men made the women do it. I could never figure out why we could make the bullets but not touch the guns.

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GRANT: Shternberg wrote that the kin system was so deeply ingrained in Nivkh minds that they even projected it onto dogs, and tried to ensure that dogs mated only with prescribed kin. It sounds so funny.

LIUTOVA: Are you sure about that? It was probably just to maintain the breed.

KHAILOVA: People had all kinds of ideas about what made an attractive dog. But I never heard about canine marriage! Dogs were just dogs. We fed them and played with them. But who would know so much to organize their dogs' lives?

II. ELIZAVETA ERMOLAEVNA MERKULOVA

Moskal'vo, June 15, 1995

When I first met Elizaveta Merkulova in the North Sakhalin shipping port of Moskal'vo in 1990, she struck me with her ability to slip effortlessly between stories of growing up in a small traditional Gilyak village with her parents, and the waves of Sovietization that eventually made that world a museum piece. Her father was a successful Gilyak hunter and trader before he died young, and her mother remarried into a pro-Communist Gilyak family, often leaving her daughter torn between two sets of relatives and two competing ideologies. One day early in our acquaintance, she told me she wanted to show me something of her mother's, and returned to the living room wearing a floor-length Chinese gown in a blinding silk brocade, the likes of which I had seen only in movies. "It's in pretty good condition," she said, fingering stray threads holding prerevolutionary Chinese coins around the hem, "considering how long it was buried in the ground." Her mother had buried the dress, along with other outward trappings of premodern Gilyak life, in a box in the sand in 1937, unearthing it in the years of Khrushchev's political reprieves, some 20 years later.

When we met again in 1995, she had retired from her job as an accountant with the shipping port and was contemplating a move to a new apartment after the earthquake.

GRANT: Gilyak group marriage was one of the themes that made Shternberg's work famous. When you read about it, did it remind you of stories you knew?

MERKULOVA: I've read those stories about how a man would offer his wife to a visitor for the night, but I can't believe any of it. When I was young, my Russian friends would even ask me about it. Everyone thinks it's what we used to do. But I can't believe it, because I remember how jealously all my mother's and father's families treated the women. They were unbelievably protective and jealous. Among [Gilyaks] at least, I mean, I just don't see it. Think of all the instances of men killing their wives out of jealousy. It used to happen more frequently when I was young, but it happens today. So to imagine that a man would just offer his wife to another under those circumstances, it seems impossible. It was all a big Russian fantasy.

GRANT: There are lots of things that are hard for outsiders to understand. I've been trying to figure out the kinship system for years now and I still only have a general idea.

MERKULOVA: You find it difficult? I don't find it difficult, but that's probably because I grew up with it. I think a lot gets lost in the translation since there are some words that just don't really have translations. Even if you take the simplest words like *imk* and *itk*: Everyone thinks that this means "mother" and "father," and that's true. But neither of those words really give you a sense of what it's like when everyone is connected to each other through formal relations. There's no context to place these words when you have to start saying "the son of my sister of my father . . ."! Whereas we would just say *pu* (you know, in the eastern dialect), and you say it knowing that everyone is connected to everyone else in some important way.

GRANT: What about standard notions of polygamy? A man having more than one wife?

MERKULOVA: It's nothing that I've ever seen, but I have heard of things like that. You can find these things here and there. My uncle, for example, my mother's brother, took on a second wife. He went from Moskal'vo to the Rybnovsk shore when I was young (I was 5), and came back with a beautiful new young wife. That was in 1938. And in 1939, she bore him a little son. So he had two wives, an older and a younger.

GRANT: Why would he want two wives?

MERKULOVA: Who can answer that? It wasn't for the children. His first wife had three children, and his second had many more though only three survived. They lived well together, the group of them. Both of the women got along well. I remember staying with them when we first moved to Nekrasovka from Moskal'vo. We lived with them for 5 years, and it was always a friendly environment. They had their own house, a big house, and my uncle was both a hunter and a fisherman. He always fed the whole family.

GRANT: How did people react to them as friends and neighbors?

MERKULOVA: Perfectly fine. But I think that people had an easy way with it since the family had an easy way with it. The women were always very kind to each other

and helped each other. One would stay home and make kasha while the other went out for berries. One took care of the children while the other went to work in the garden. And the whole time my uncle kept bringing home food—fish and seals, ducks and deer. What abundance they had in their home. It seemed to be a prosperous home, so people were happy to know them.

It all lasted through the war, until around 1951, when my uncle died. Then the family divided into two. The younger wife remarried and moved out with her children. The older wife remained with her children.

GRANT: When he took the second wife, then, it was by Nivkh marriage rules?

MERKULOVA: By proper custom, sure. I remember how we sent him off from Moskal'vo on his sled, with bells and special decorations. He went with furs and gifts. It was so exciting, and she was so beautiful looking when she came back with him. They stayed with us overnight and then went on to Nekrasovka. Their children still live there. There are two of the children, Valia and Zhenia, who were both born within 5 days of each other, but by different mothers.

GRANT: When you yourself were growing up, did your parents have plans to match you with someone?

MERKULOVA: Absolutely.

GRANT: I was remembering how Shura told me she was supposed to marry Volodia K—. What a match to imagine!

MERKULOVA: I was born in 1933, and around then an old man, Iadin Kravchuk I think his name was, on Schmidt Peninsula, knew my father, Pudín. Iadin had only daughters, then, but he had a growing family. So, despite having no sons at the time, Iadin “chartered” me in advance. Five years later when he did have a son, that became the boy I was supposed to marry.

Eventually my father died. My mother married again, and we moved to the Rybnovsk shore to Sladkoe Ozero. Iadin came to see us, and he said to my stepfather, he said, “How can you allow my little Elizaveta to marry whoever she likes?” I wasn’t marrying anyone then, since I was only 13, but Iadin was concerned about keeping the agreement. My stepfather said, “Elizaveta will make her own decision. This is a different time now. This is the Soviet Union. Whatever you and Pudín agreed upon doesn’t have any bearing anymore.”

Eventually I saw my betrothed in Iuzhno-Sakhalinsk. I was married, but he hadn’t married yet. He was studying to become an engineer, while I was studying accounting. We laughed about it then, but I still in some ways think of being connected to him.

So there you have it. I had a betrothed and I had an uncle with two wives. I am a witness to these Nivkh traditions. My uncle was such a strict man—there were all sorts of rules he insisted on, especially with women. If you were a woman, there were all sorts of objects you weren’t supposed to step over, guns or nets or anything to do with growing things, catching things. But the difference in all these things for me, as I told you, was that my stepfather was a big Communist. He was a very dedicated Communist . . .

GRANT: Who rushed to the defense of his new daughter?

MERKULOVA: Communism was good for a lot of things! Who knows what would have happened? If my father had remained alive, they would have tried to give me away and I would have refused. Why would I need something like that?

GRANT: Did other Nivkh families react strangely that you weren't planning to marry your betrothed?

MERKULOVA: We didn't live close enough to other people to matter. There were only three families on Sladkoe Ozero. Vera Khein was working there, as a teacher, and I was studying there.

GRANT: Was there a reason for why you were supposed to marry that one son in particular? Did it matter which clan he was from?

MERKULOVA: He was from a totally different clan. I don't really know why it was him. But the rule was pretty straightforward. My father had a sister, and she had three sons. And I had the right to marry any of these three sons. But, for example, if she had a daughter, and my father had a son, then they wouldn't be allowed to marry.

GRANT: There is mention in the text of stories of lovers who were forbidden to marry and then met tragic ends. Was there anything like that from stories you heard?

MERKULOVA: Maybe because I never knew anyone like that it seems hard to imagine. Women literally almost never had lovers. They married the man they were supposed to marry and that was that, especially during early Soviet times.

GRANT: Well, what if there was just someone that they liked and wanted to marry, instead of their betrothed?

MERKULOVA: I can't even imagine it, but it must have happened sometime.

GRANT: What about your friends that you grew up with? Did they have to go through similar situations as yourself?

MERKULOVA: Of all my friends—this was in the 1950s—I was the only one who was betrothed in the Nivkh tradition. The single one. Everyone else did as they liked.

GRANT: Was there any special way of concluding the agreement, when Pudín and Iadín decided that you would be betrothed?

MERKULOVA: There's nothing formal that I know about. All I can tell you is that my parents were very concerned that they had so few children. My mother kept having more and more children, and so few survived. When I was born they wanted to make sure they kept me. I was born in September right at the time when the whales were running. They took me to the village soviet and registered me, but in order that I survived they had a special ritual where they put me under the doorway of the house and covered me over with refuse. My mother told me about it but I don't know all the details. Then they swept out the house as if they were sweeping out evil spirits and pretending that there was nothing in the house to steal, since the spirits wouldn't see me under the pile of refuse. Then they carried me outside and pronounced special incantations, or maybe called a shaman. But I know that they went to all sorts of lengths to keep me. My mother had had 13 children, and I was the single one to survive, so maybe the spells were what made the difference.

GRANT: When your mother remarried, and married your stepfather, was that by Nivkh tradition?

MERKULOVA: No, in fact, she remarried against the will of her brothers. Technically, she should have married one of my father's younger brothers, but both of them had died. And if there weren't any husband's younger brothers, she should have either remained a widow or perhaps married someone else of her family's choosing. But it was more difficult than that, because my stepfather was also a dyed-in-the-wool Communist. He was such a believer that even when he was arrested in 1937, and escaped from the [Stalinist labor] camps, he still believed. My mother's family didn't trust him because he was a Communist, but they also didn't trust him because he had been to prison. In the end, they wouldn't even speak to each other. My mother's relatives never exchanged a word with him.

For me it was difficult at times. On the one hand, my stepfather gave me a very modern education. He wanted me to be as educated as possible, while my mother's family didn't trust formal schooling. They weren't happy that I wasn't observing traditions in the way I should. So, I grew up superstitious, but not believing in God.

GRANT: What does it mean to be superstitious?

MERKULOVA: Well, for example, when you go into the forest, you should never take a shovel to the land: That's a sin. The same thing goes for an ax or a knife. The ground is like a skin, and you can wound it. Everything was a sin. This was a sin, that was a sin. But in the end, you could see: Men could do almost everything while women couldn't. And my stepfather would say, that's all deception. Do what you like! So I grew up of two minds.

Not all of the traditions were so imposing. My mother's family insisted that every time you went out into the forest you should take a cigarette or some food and leave it in the forest as an offering. And the same thing with the sea. Every time you go fishing you have to give the sea something back. And I still do that today. My stepfather would have said it was all nonsense.

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GRANT: Did your mother's family ever talk to you about *kinz*?

MERKULOVA: There are all kinds of *kinz*, and mostly they scare you. It's hard to know where to start describing them. In one sense, they are just like any bad spirits that you don't want to be around. I am moving across the street into a new apartment, for example, and I'm nervous because there was a murder in the apartment last year. That's why it's being sold. A husband killed his wife and the blood ran all over the floor. But people tell me not to be afraid. We're going to have cats walk around the apartment first, like Russians do, to scare away the *kinz*.

So that's one example. You might think it's odd that I should have followed so much of what my mother's family said, but you have to realize what it's like in those kinds of situations. My stepfather was only one person, and in my mother's family there were dozens and dozens of people who felt exactly the opposite as he did.

GRANT: Have you ever felt that Nivkhi were more inclined to extrasensory phenomena than other people?

MERKULOVA: I couldn't say so. I mean, I've never met any Nivkhi who I thought had talent for that kind of thing. People say there are shamans, but I've never believed in shamans. Do you believe in them?

GRANT: As an anthropologist, I believe in almost everything.

MERKULOVA: They say there's a young boy in Nekrasovka who can see things, but I've never met him. You should ask. I think he knows Galina Fedorovna.

GRANT: When you were growing up, did your family ever have you wear a kind of bracelet around your wrist?

MERKULOVA: Absolutely, either just a few cords, or sometimes something out of wool. Sometimes you wore it around your wrist, and sometimes they would give you something to wear around your neck. What it was for, I'm not sure, either to protect you or to heal you. I remember though, I was always wearing one or the other.

When I'm afraid of spirits, I still have something tied. I have an older Russian woman do it for me, like last month when I went to go see that new apartment. I went to this woman's house and she tied a red thread around my wrist, and I made sure I was wearing it before I went inside. Whenever I'm afraid of what might happen, I'll have her tie my wrist to protect me. Who knows what it means. What did Shternberg say?

III. NATAL'IA DEM'IANOVNA VORON

Nogliki, June 18, 1995

For my first two trips to Sakhalin in 1990 and 1992, Natal'ia Dem'ianovna Voron was someone I always met in the company of her two sisters, Lidiia Dem'ianovna Kimova, who had first invited me to Sakhalin from Moscow, and Galina Dem'ianovna Lok, a Nivkh ethnographer who ran a small museum in the central Sakhalin town of Nogliki, where they all lived. In the early 1990s, Natal'ia Dem'ianovna supervised a Nivkh crafts workshop, one of the early native cooperatives to come out of perestroika. When we met on Sakhalin in 1995, she had read through the Shternberg manuscript more thoroughly than anyone, and our conversation moved from kinship algebra to ways of reviving the workshop, which had recently closed because of funding problems.

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GRANT: Shternberg talks in the manuscript about the Nivkh tradition of hospitality to guests. I am almost constantly a guest in people's homes, but I didn't realize until recently that according to tradition you can not only stay for a long time, but that you could request food for the road when you were leaving!

VORON: People could do that, and they did. When guests were getting ready to leave, it was almost as much work as when they were arriving, since you had to prepare all sorts of extra food for them to take with them. But you can't say that everyone did it. It really depended on the woman who ran the household, because if she didn't want to take care of the guests, then the whole affair could go by the wayside.

It also depended on the strength of the bond between the two clans, if one family was from one clan and the second was from another. By certain rules, you had to feed certain clansmen, the men in particular, depending on who had married whom. So, for example, whenever we see Baba T——, she always prepares some dried fish for us, just to show that she still observes the marriage rules from decades ago.

GRANT: How is she related to you?

VORBON: Wait a second, let me try and figure this out. I'm not sure. I know that she is some kind of relation to my father, and . . . let's see. That means, she is supposed to make offerings to us because we are his children. It's more complicated than that, but I don't remember.

GRANT: So, what does she call you?

VORBON: She just calls us, *og'la*, "children."

GRANT: So I'm wondering, in terms of clan, why is she obliged to feed you? Not because you are children.

VORBON: No. How can I describe it to you? If my son Andrei or Iura were to marry . . . Wait, I've lost the thread.

GRANT: Well, why just men, for example? Why wouldn't she be just as obliged to feed the women?

VORBON: There used to be the idea that men were the providers, and therefore they deserved more attention than the women. But that was a hundred years ago, really. People don't think the same way anymore.

GRANT: I'm thinking of an example that Rima Petrovna mentioned to me, which was that every time she meets Baba Olia, who is at least 30 years older than her, Baba Olia prepares food for her, because of someone who married someone . . .

VORBON: Wait. Wait. I know. Let's see. It's because Baba Olia is the sister of Rima's father, and remember that it all goes through the male line. The female line is different. So, if you are talking about the sister of your father, or someone from their family, we call them *nanakh*. But if it's by the mother's line, if we are talking about the sisters of our mother, we call them *machk-imk*, not just *imk*, meaning mother, but *machk-imk*, that is, younger mother. And if it was my older sister, then my children would be obliged to call her "older mother." I've seen in books that everyone called their aunts "mother," but it's much more specific than that. Naturally there was one word for your mother, and the rest followed in relation to where someone stood to your mother and father.

GRANT: When you see older Nivkhi today, is there a sense of clan ties in a way that you don't experience maybe with your peers?

VORBON: Well, in what sense? I mean, I sometimes still use the formal kinship terms when I see people like Baba Olia because I want to show respect, or simply because she is just related, as the wife of our uncle. But it's not deeper than that. I don't think that the clan system tells us that much about each other anymore.

GRANT: So when you got married, did you know the clan of your husband?

VORBON: Oh, probably, but I don't even think I could tell you today. I got married on the mainland, in Nikolaevsk on the Amur, and my parents were here [on Sakhalin], so there weren't the same kind of connections. My husband—that was Andriusha's father.

GRANT: So at least at one point you knew his clan?

VORBON: I did! I can tell you that our father was Cheivin, but you have to remember that women are clanless. When we marry we take the clan of our husbands. So we are from a clan when we are born, but we are never really of that clan. We were always for sale.

GRANT: Do you have any feeling about the way the position of women has changed over the years? When you read books like Shternberg's you realize how much of a man's world it was for Nivkhi at the turn of the century. But today, Nivkh women are not only the only people who can remember much about traditional Nivkh life, but they are also the community leaders. The Nivkhi who are active politically and economically are almost all women. I mean I can think of one or two men who are exceptions, but they seem like exceptions.

VORBON: You know, Bruce, you should also try to talk to my younger cousin, Kostia. Do you know him? He knows a lot. He remembers a lot too.

GRANT: I haven't met him. I should. I guess I am so struck at how few Nivkh men there are over the age of 40, period. Over the age of 60 is almost unimaginable. And yet there are older Nivkh women, relatively, everywhere.

VORBON: Yes. Some people say that men react differently to their environment, more markedly than women do. Do you know what I mean? It's as if women are more flexible because they take things into greater perspective, whereas Nivkh men . . . they look around at Soviet life, at the landscape and its horrors, and all they can do is drink.

You know, emptiness is really the word for it. I can think of all kinds of things I would like to do, or that I would like to see, to resurrect Nivkh traditions. But without men around, either to help, since so many formal public traditions were led by men, or even just to be there—it seems so incomplete. It's so sad.

GRANT: Probably the only person I can think of who really inspires me is Tolia Ngavan—he's energetic, smart, resourceful.

VORBON: The other person who remembers a lot is Leonid Iugain, also one of our cousins on our mother's side. He's an expert at boat-making especially, although he recently became an invalid. I've never been sure why we feel so much more tied to our mother's side of the family. There has never been the same pull on our father's side. With everyone on our mother's side, we socialize more. When our mother died, for example, Tania Agniun took so much care of us. She almost became our mother. We could always go see her as if we were going home.

GRANT: Can you tell me about the rule I've read about, where brothers and sisters were not supposed to speak to each other, have conversations with each other at home? I find it something so tricky to imagine. I think—but they're brothers and sisters.

VORBON: I don't even have to look far for an example, because our own father almost never spoke to his sisters. His younger sister was Vera. And his older sister—I'm not even sure what her name was, but I'm not surprised. She was Vova Kekhan's mother, the shaman. She and my father never spoke to each other. When we were young, we used to go visit them on sleds, sometimes, but we would visit his brother much more often, to go see Baba Olia. It was somehow improper when we went to go visit his sisters.

GRANT: But when he did visit them, did he really not talk at all?

VORBON: Not at all.

GRANT: At all?

VORBON: My father would in fact only communicate through our mother. If he wanted his sister to pass something to him across the table, he would ask my mother to ask her first.

GRANT: Did you ever ask why?

VORBON: It's strange, but I never asked. I mean, as a child—this was in the 1950s—I always assumed that they had had an argument. It was such a strange thing for us because we were already living in a modern fashion. We talked and played and joked with our brothers all the time, just like people do now. It never occurred to me that people wouldn't. It's strange because our father never mentioned it to us, but he observed it so strictly with his own sisters. It was only when I was older that I heard it was a rule.

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GRANT: Let's take an example. What about Arselan? Your nephew. Lidiia Dem'ianovna's son. Who would he be supposed to marry? The daughter of his father's sister?

VORBON: Wait a second. Try Oleg, the son of our older brother. He should marry either Veronika, or Soiana—that is, the daughter of his father's sisters. Do you get it?

GRANT: Wait. Sorry. I meant, the daughter of his mother's brother.

VORBON: Wait. Right right right. Arselan should . . . wait.

GRANT: Mother's brother's daughter, right?

VORBON: Hmm.

GRANT: Like, the daughter of Evgenii, or Leonid or Aleksei, I think. Because it's the brother of the mother.

VORBON: So that would be Olia, or Ella. I guess that's it. Are you sure?

GRANT: No. I thought you were supposed to know!

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GRANT: You know, you read a lot about what the rules were, about what people were and were not supposed to do. But you hear less often about the consequences. What would happen when a spirit did punish someone? Were there times when your parents looked at a misfortune and said, "*Kinz*"?



FIG. 29. Zoia Ivanovna Agniun, who remained behind in the closed village of Romanovka after it was closed in 1972, modeled a Gilyak salmon skin dress outside her home in 1990. Courtesy of Douglas Vogt.

VORBON: The most common examples are from hunting or fishing. If fishermen didn't properly feed the sea or the river—with tobacco, or vodka, or whatever—then *kinz* would take revenge.

GRANT: Have you thought about the recent earthquake the same way?

VORBON: Sure I have. Everything is possible. But let me give you another example.



FIG. 30. Elizaveta Merkulova retrieved this Chinese brocade dress from her mother in the late 1950s, only after it had been buried underground in sand for 20 years so that it couldn't be used by local police during Stalinism as evidence of her family's ties to foreign elements. Moskal'vo, Sakhalin Island, 1990. Photographed by Bruce Grant.

In Romanovka, about half a kilometer to the south, on the cape, is the place where our grandmother used to live. That's where her house used to be. I never saw it, but Lidiia Dem'ianovna remembers it. Baba Olia told us about it, because Baba Olia was raised by our grandmother, she was practically her favorite child. Anyway—do you know that old guy Izgin?

GRANT: I know Shura Izgina, she's around 40.

VORBON: She must be his daughter. Anyway, he was a mean old guy. He resolved to build a *nyo* there, a Nivkh summer house, the kind on stilts, right on the spot where our grandmother used to live. Everyone told him he couldn't. It wasn't just the place where our grandmother lived and died, but she had even raised a bear there, and that was it. There was no way you could build a house there without causing havoc. But he ignored everyone and said they were lying. He built the house but then went back to Romanovka, and his wife stayed there by herself. Apparently even the very first night, she was going to sleep and heard this "tok-tok-tok" sound in the house, as if someone was knocking. But she decided it didn't mean anything. So she went to sleep. Then there was a sound as if someone was crawling along the roof. The front door opened . . . She saw something black and big, and that was it. She didn't remember anything after that.

Early in the morning, when she woke up, it was already light. It was summer so it got light early. She woke up and ran into the village. She found her husband, who had been drinking and was hung over, and she started to shout at him, "I told you that building there was forbidden. *Kinz!*" But he put her off and accused her of being a coward. "What are you carrying on about?" he said. So she said, "Fine. Go and sleep there yourself. I'm not sleeping there anymore."

He went to the house and had the same thing happen. He saw an enormous dark apparition and fled from the house in fright. That was when he became convinced that, indeed, it was sinful to have built there. It was the place of the bear.

GRANT: So in the end they took the house down?

VORBON: Yes, they took it away and put it up somewhere else.

GRANT: I remember once when I was in Chir-Unvd with Galina Dem'ianovna [Lok] and I wanted to go look at the cemetery, but Galina Dem'ianovna said we shouldn't. Was that because of *kinz* as well?

VORBON: Right. But also, Chir-Unvd was the site of old Nivkh settlements. It's not a good place to be since there are a lot of *kinz* there. It's really like that.

GRANT: It's not that hard to believe, not just because of the forlorn quality there, but knowing about the Nivkh villages that were burned down to make way for the one that is there now. New lives for old.

VORBON: I don't know if you know the two-story wooden house in the old part, where Lidiia Romanovna lives. She was raised entirely in modern ways, she's even younger than me, but even she has trouble with the *kinz* that are there. I went there once with Masha because we had to pick up money for the elementary school. When we got there we went to go see Lidiia Romanovna, and I can't begin to explain to you what it felt like. There was this tremendous feeling of gravity, weight bearing down upon me. I felt like I would fall asleep even before I got there. It was nightmarish.

When we got there, I couldn't even eat, I wanted so much to sleep. Lidiia Romanovna laid out the couch for me in the living room. I lay there and dreamt, lay and dreamt, lay and dreamt. But it wasn't sleeping—it was more of a haze. I remem-

ber that they went off to the bathhouse, and then came back. It was starting to get dark. And the whole time I was in this strange, dark space. When they came back from the bathhouse, I told Lidiia Romanovna that I had to go to sleep for the night, so she got out blankets, and I laid down. So, the living room is laid out with doors that kind of open toward the kitchen—the kitchen is more like down the hall. Have you been there?

GRANT: Uh huh.

VORBON: Well, then you know that you can see a corner of the kitchen from the couch in the main room. I could see them and heard them talking quietly in the other room, thinking I was sleeping.

Then suddenly, I felt something bearing down upon me, as if it had me in its grip. But I couldn't for the life of me cry out. I tried and tried. "Galia! Galia!" I tried, but nothing came out. It was one of the most terrible feelings I've ever known. "Galia!" I finally cried. But they kept sitting there, drinking tea and talking. I was really awake now, but couldn't move. I couldn't even sit up. So I had to wait for them to talk themselves out and come into the room. Finally Galina Dem'ianovna came into the room and lay down. I couldn't move, but I still felt better that someone was there, and I fell asleep.

When I woke up in the morning, I looked down at my wrists. They were practically blue from bruises, and you could see the outline of someone's hand's around them. I showed Lidiia Romanovna and she said that it wasn't the first time something like this had happened, that even she was afraid to live there. She said that some nights she would lock up the whole apartment, and then hear all sorts of sounds of doors opening. So she would jump up and look, but everything would be in place. The whole building is like that. They think people must have been buried there before.

GRANT: Does it matter, I mean, all the Nivkhi who weren't buried in a traditional way under Soviet power? I mean, they don't cremate people any more.

VORBON: I don't think that matters as much. It's one thing whether people get buried properly or not; but it's another to build on top of ritual sites. That gets punished severely.

IV. GALINA DEM'IANOVNA LOK

Iuzhno-Sakhalinsk, June 20, 1995

Throughout my fieldwork on Sakhalin, Galina Dem'ianovna Lok was the most central guiding figure. She grew up with her large family on the northwestern coastal town of Tengi, moving to Rybnovsk and later the Amur in her teenage years when her parents died young. After marrying a Buriat man and living in Ulan Ude for many years, she returned to Sakhalin in her 40s to run the Nogliki branch of the Sakhalin Regional Museum. In May of 1995, we sat together for several days reading the Shternberg manuscript aloud to each other for review. Some weeks later, we sat down to record this conversation.

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FIG. 31. Natalia Vorbon (center row, third from left), in a family photograph with her sisters, Lidiia Kimova (center row, third from right) and Galina Lok (center row, center place), Nogliki, Sakhalin Island, 1990. Courtesy of Douglas Vogt.

GRANT: I think that most people could pick up [Shternberg's] book and more or less get the idea behind the Nivkh kinship system, however complicated—that people were organized into categories that underwrote marriage and exchange and 100 other things. But in reality, was it something natural that everyone you knew understood and accepted, or was it something that some Nivkhi themselves ever had trouble grasping?

LOK: It wasn't difficult. There wasn't anything you had to "know," or study, or introduce. It's not like today when we all sit around and read it as if it was about Africa. When a Nivkh child grew up, he immediately knew which clan he belonged to, and what his rights and obligations were. He knew immediately how he stood in relation to the category of *akhmalk*, how he stood in relation to the category of *tuvng*, and so on. That's because from the earliest years, his parents would tell him, "Those are the uncles you have to maintain a distance from, and those are the ones who you can be closer to." He knew it from the very beginning. When a girl was born, she knew from as early as 5 or 6 what clan she would marry into. There never used to be such confusion like we have today, where we have to dig around in books to figure out

who is *pu* and who is *ang'rei*. Today, we study it like science, but before people knew it automatically.

GRANT: One of the strangest parts for someone outside the system, I think, is the use of one word to describe both one's biological mother as well as a line of women connected by clan.

LOK: But of course people knew. I mean, it's your mother!

GRANT: When we're talking in Russian though, like now, we rely on adjectives like blood [*krovnaia*] or birth [*rodnaia*] to indicate a biological mother. Were there similar auxiliary words in Nivkh to make that distinction?

LOK: There were a lot of ways to do it. One was just to refer to one's mother (*imk*), and then "one's big mother" (*pila-imk*), meaning, your mother's older sister, or "one's little mother," (*machk-imk*), meaning your mother's younger sister.

GRANT: What kind of personal reaction do you have when you read through this kind of material and realize how much of it has gone by the wayside? Is it a strange feeling?

LOK: That's hard to answer because I feel like I am reading about Nivkhi, but the Nivkhi I read about don't exist anymore. It was such a different world only 50 years ago. Today I can't really point to anyone who I consider to be a real representative of



FIG. 32. Galina Lok in Romanovka, Sakhalin Island, 1990. Photographed by Bruce Grant.

that world. How can I tell you that I'm sorry it's on its way out when it passed away such a long time ago?

GRANT: Where is the good nationalist in you?

LOK: As a good nationalist, I would say, sure, what a shame. Like any poor animal that is the last of its kind and is quickly on its way to extinction. Or like some rare plant that is about to die off because it no longer has the environment to support it. Of course it makes me feel bad. We're talking about an entire culture, an entire way of looking at the world which was different from all others, and which we are never going to see again. Poof. It's gone. But what else should I say? As a modern person, I know that times change. It's hard to avoid. Whether it's bad or not, it still happens.

GRANT: When you get together with your own brothers and sisters, do you still use [Gilyak terms of address] to refer to each other, or particularly, your older relatives?

LOK: If we were talking about before WWII, I could say, there would still be some of these traditions left. But no one I know addresses each other the way Shternberg describes in this book. If we held on to the language, that might have been one thing. But we didn't even hold on to the clan itself, which was the thread that ran through all of Nivkh life and held it together. I mean, I could go back to WWII, but I really want to go back to the 1860s, when the island was colonized by the Manchu because the Manchu mostly left us alone. Once the Russians and the Japanese started settling the island in the second half of the 19th century, it was already difficult to talk about people living the way Shternberg described in the book. Even Shternberg says this, that he was describing a system rather than a whole way of life for people who had already started to suffer economically and had begun to move from place to place in search of a way to support themselves.

GRANT: What about someone like Baba Olia, who was an older female clan member, *pila-imk*?

LOK: Baba Olia is an exception. We just call her "Mama," *imk*, because she raised our youngest sister after our parents died.

GRANT: Natal'ia Dem'ianovna told me about how Lidiia Dem'ianovna was supposed to marry, at one time, Ivan Khein. How difficult to imagine.

LOK: But that's how it worked.

GRANT: That's how it worked, but in what way? Does that mean you always knew it wouldn't quite happen, or, you somehow grew up thinking you were to marry someone in particular and then one day you realized that it wouldn't happen?

LOK: I think we always had a sense that there was a way things were supposed to be. I mean, we joked about it, that Lidiia would marry Ivan, but it was such a different time then, the late 1950s. We were going to school, and we were all living in different towns. There was never any serious conversation that these marriages would actually take place. Maybe if we were still living the same antediluvian way of life we might have married by the rules. Why not?

GRANT: How did your parents react? Were they both in agreement that you should all do as you wanted?

LOK: Of course they weren't happy about it, but what could you say? I mean, Lidiia Dem'ianovna was really smart. She excelled in everything at school, she never had any problems, and everyone knew that she could go to Leningrad to study some more. We were in school in Kirpichiki at first, and then in Rybnovsk. Then Natal'ia Dem'ianovna went to Nikolaevsk to study. Then our older brother Evgenii Dem'ianovich went to forestry school and Lidiia Dem'ianovna went to Leningrad. We all effectively lived outside this social system.

GRANT: So your parents weren't disappointed that it didn't work out the way they had planned?

LOK: Well, they died early, but they wanted good things for us, and that's why they let us go.

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GRANT: I was curious about the tradition of raising other people's children. Was that a tradition that happened more among Nivkhi than among Russians, by your experience?

LOK: If we're talking about situations where children lost their parents during the war, or to illness, then, no, you couldn't say that Nivkhi were different. Nivkhi were different in the sense of the marriage rules that encouraged young girls to grow up in the family of their intended husbands. For example, I was supposed to marry Volodia Kekhan, and all the time I was growing up, his parents would always tell me that I could go and live with them any time I wanted. I was going to school so I didn't leave my family, but I always knew that there was another kind of school I could go to, which would just be Nivkh life. If I had gone to live with them I wouldn't have studied, but I would have got up in the morning and gone down to the beach with the whole family while the men went out fishing and the women worked on the nets or dried the fish. It was a whole pedagogy of its own. From early childhood, that's how a child knew when to put out a net, what you could do while you were between tides, when you were supposed to check the nets. It was all second nature. It also makes you laugh when you look at all the Soviets did to make us real proletarians. Before, maybe one fishermen officially had access to land here, and access to water there, but everyone worked together all the time. Children would eat at anyone's house any time. Relatives would spend whole seasons together and help out. Now we are Communists and all we do is sit inside by ourselves and watch television!

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GRANT: There is a lot in the text about matchmaking, agreements, and contracts on the part of men. You get the impression that women had no choice in the matter. I guess I want to ask two things: Was it really the case that women had little choice? And, more generally, how is it that 100 years later, we can barely point to 2 or three Nivkh men who are in any positions of responsibility? Nivkh women are at the head of almost every family.

LOK: Let me answer the first question. I think that the exceptions are always more sensational than the general rule, and my impression is that women didn't live all

that badly. The things about which Shternberg writes, here and in other books, are true: When a woman ran away from her husband, she got punished. But in other respects the clan relationships protected her. We have to remember that the clan was about much more than marriage. It was a whole system of interrelationships that were social and economic and political. And the woman's position in this system was monitored on all sides.

The second question. Why do we have so few men? I think we have to look at Sovietization. We know that it was full of good intentions, teaching literacy and sharing a Russian way of life with Nivkhi. But on the other hand, there were restrictions at every turn. From the very start the Russians hounded Nivkhi from the places where they had lived from the beginning of time. Naturally Nivkhi lived in the best spots for fishing and hunting, whether it was a question of summer villages or winter villages. So, either they chased them out altogether, or they just crowded them out and established kolkhozes. You have to think this through. Imagine—the fishing waters are now the property of the kolkhoz, state property. The average older Nivkh fisherman can literally no longer go out in his boat and fish because he would be violating state property, almost everywhere. He can catch 60 or 100 kg of fish each year, though that is all of 30 or 40 salmon, which he could catch with his own net in one good day. So he is penned in. Soviet medicine insists that eating raw fish is dangerous, that eating seal is dangerous, that killing animals generally is not ethical and that hunting bears or eating them is not attractive. In short, we have a heap of laws that forbid an entire way of life. That's it. The Nivkh man is degraded. But even that is overly simple. Remember that in 1937 hundreds of Nivkh men were sent off to labor camp after labor camp for merely having hunted bears or having spoken their native language. So you're not allowed to hunt. What are you supposed to do? At the same time, you have Russian passersby offering you vodka every 15 minutes to go catch fish for them, or go hunt a bear for them. What nonsense.

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GRANT: Going back to Shternberg for a moment, I wonder when, or whether, we can talk even about kinship systems like this one working as efficiently as people describe it. Even Shternberg, writing in the 1890s, makes it clear that he was describing an ideal type. We know that the island had been colonized in one way or another for a long time when he arrived.

LOK: When Shternberg got there, all the epidemics had already started. It was a different kind of colonization by the Russians and the Japanese because Nivkhi never had such close contacts with the Chinese. Or at least, we don't have the same kind of record for the Chinese. When Shternberg arrived, there was already smallpox, scurvy, and syphilis. You can just imagine. There are all these Nivkh villages in the middle of the taiga and "Boom," a completely different world comes upon them. People died off by the family, one after another, from smallpox especially.

GRANT: It's not hard to see from archives that at the turn of the century Nivkhi lived like other peoples; they traded and exchanged with the Chinese and Japanese and others. When the Russians arrived, I mean, we always just say "Russians," but which

Russians? We're really talking about a penal colony set up on the island and peopled by a desperate class of exiles.

LOK: The most barbarous kind you can imagine.

I feel I always take Shternberg's work with a grain of salt because the people he was working with were different then. Most of his informants weren't very serious. Nivkhi were different then. I mean, I'm helping you today, like Shura or Zoia Ivanovna did when you were up in Nekrasovka, because we have a plain interest in preserving a culture, in making sure that people understand what Nivkhi are about. But, by contrast, the best Nivkhi of past times were always very laconic. They rarely talked with anyone just passing through. Nivkhi were always very closed people. You had to draw everything out of them, then ask one person, then ask another person. And even when you would ask them something, they would give you 2 or three words and that's it. You would have to be on the ball enough to know which of the 2 or three words you heard from any number of people were actually useful or true. I think so.

You know, not long ago, I listened to Alla Viktorovna's recordings from the 1970s. She used to travel around the Amur for her dissertation and record Nivkh songs. She's had them for 20 years, and we asked her if we could write them up for a book of Nivkh songs. I listened to hours and hours of tapes. The people she spoke to—you can hardly imagine. All the good singers she could have found, all the normal, smart people . . . not one of them was on tape. Everyone was drunk, every single one. God knows how she found them. I can hardly describe it. They would sing, and wheeze, sing, and wheeze. And then start with the wildest profanity. I couldn't believe it. She would say in Nivkh, "*Syk?*" (OK?), and they would say "*Syk! Syk!*" and then start singing songs in Nivkh that were complete mockeries, completely profane, nothing but the crudest jokes, completely uncensored, usually about her, all while she sat there with her tape recorder. I tried to translate it and I thought, what a loss all of this was. But I knew it would be like that.

So then last year Mamcheva called me and said she got a copy of Shternberg's tapes from 1910, from when he was on Sakhalin. I said that I would be over right away.

GRANT: That was the second trip he made for writing up this book.

LOK: Right. He used one of those old phonographic recording cylinders. This Nivkh man was speaking. The first few lines were brilliant. I had never heard such beautiful Nivkh speech, and from so long ago. But then Shternberg asked him to start singing. He began . . . and it was exactly the same as with Alla Viktorovna in the 1970s. Total profanity from top to bottom.

GRANT: But, if we're talking 1910, could we say that Shternberg at least had better luck?

LOK: You really can't. They were absolutely the same. I was even amazed at how the people they found played more or less the same tricks on both ethnographers even though they were 60 years apart. It should be funny, but it was just so sad. They were so drunk. It was complete mockery.

GRANT: Well, what is an ethnographer anyway? I mean, in the classic tradition you say to someone: "Please take me in, please feed me, and please answer all my

questions about your personal life" So you think of Shternberg, arriving on Sakhalin 100 years ago, a prisoner, and Jewish among Russians at that.

LOK: I don't think it's unusual that he ended up with the less pleasant Nivkhi, but it does make me think how important it is for me to try myself. I think of Grigorii Pakskun, who you met and who died a few years ago. I asked him to help me record some songs, and he knew I knew the language. There are so few people that do, he knew he couldn't get away with fooling around. The material he gave me! The songs he sang were like entire epic poems. I had never heard anything like it in my life. I should go around and record everything all of these people know, but no one has a dime. On the Amur, for example, there are two people I know who would be staggering to talk to. I might find them today, but tomorrow they might be dead. These people—they are from a different planet.

The odd thing is that I think what Shternberg wrote was fine. I am more interested in the moments where he got the point than the times when he didn't. There are moments when he is trying to describe Nivkh culture proper, and others when he is more interested in broad, sweeping comparisons with all Tunguso-Manchurian peoples. That's when he starts to flag. Once in another article he said that Nivkhi would chew each other's food so that others could eat it. As if everybody did this! I mean, I could understand if he was talking about penguins. Or if he said that a few people did this for older Nivkhi who had no teeth, or for babies. But to say that everyone did it all the time is just a misunderstanding. His books are full of things like that.

GRANT: Shternberg wrote once that Nivkh women frequently have an expression on their face of being angry. I laughed when I saw it. What do you think?

LOK: [laughs] He's right, of course.