

ELEVEN



SEXUAL LIFE¹

[142–158; 213–228; 246–257; 124–130]

THE SEXUAL FREEDOM which group marriage offers to the Gilyak is naturally conducive to the development of great sensuality. The lifestyle of the people also contributes to this development. The main occupation of the Gilyak, fishing, leaves them time for a great deal of leisure, while on the other hand, the only occupation which might serve as an outlet for emotional energy, hunting, plays a relatively unimportant role in their life. They do not undertake distant hunting expeditions, and the seasonal pursuit of sables, squirrels, foxes, deer, and even the sporadic tracking of the rather mild-tempered local bear do not present any extraordinary dangers. Prominent hunters of the kind found among the Tungus are very rare among the Gilyak. The heroic feelings aroused by wars are also unknown to the Gilyak, especially during the latter half of the century. Even before that, their wars were only sporadic inter-clan conflicts for the sake of revenge or more often because of women. War as a profession or as the favorite occupation of youth was unknown to them [124].

It is therefore natural that all their emotional energy should turn towards sex. Their sexual life begins at the first signs of puberty. All their thoughts and leisure time are devoted to women, particularly so because not everybody has an opportunity to marry. The bachelors are not content merely with the women of their own village, nor do they restrict themselves only to the group of women towards whom they have legal rights. The only category of women before whom they stop are those of the class actually forbidden them. Neither time nor distance will phase the Gilyak in his romantic pursuits, as long as there is the possibility of finding a little more female companionship. Most willingly, of course, does a young man visit the villages

¹ [**Editor's note:** In the AMNH English typescript, the quality of the English translation of this chapter and the succeeding ones differed markedly from the three preceding ones prior to editing, invoking a much less literal style than found in, for example, chapter fourteen translated by Iulia Averkieva, or chapter seven, which was likely translated by Alexander Goldenweiser (appendix A). A more colorful if slightly embroidered version of this chapter can be found in Chester Chard, "Sternberg's Materials on the Sexual Life of the Gilyak," *Anthropological Papers of the University of Alaska* 10, no. 1, 13–23. While borrowing occasional phrasing from Chard's version, I have preserved the version from the AMNH English typescript. The AMNH Russian and Shternberg, *Sem'ia*, versions present this section in three chapters, "Sexual Life," "Love and Jealousy," and "Sexual Abnormalities and Perversions." The AMNH English typescript and Shternberg, *Giliaki*, use the title as above, "Sexual Life."]

of his *akhmalk* (fathers-in-law). But they also do not object to undertaking journeys to strange villages. During my travels I would often be joined by a Gilyak who voluntarily offered me his services *gratis* in the hope of encountering a romantic episode. Not a very difficult feat.

Every door is open to the newcomer because the Gilyak are traditionally hospitable and eager for gossip. Thus a Gilyak feels at home everywhere. A few hours after his arrival he usually has succeeded in visiting every house and spreading all the news. Men and women alike eagerly lend an avid ear. And at the same time he has already begun to cast glances at those he favors among the women. The rest is only a matter of erotic skill and experience. It is true that the Gilyak woman conducts herself in a most unapproachable manner. Upon the arrival of a stranger she lowers her eyes, frowns, and will scarcely deign to answer the stranger's questions. But this is merely a pretense which conceals her extreme promiscuity. Imperceptibly to others she throws stealthy and curious glances at the newcomer, which he catches at opportune moments. If the guest makes a proper impression the matter is apt to be settled rather quickly. He waylays her near the well, or in the berry patch, or will simply seize her in the entry passage. After a short symbolic dialogue on the order of, "Let us smoke together" (that is, take turns at the same pipe), or "Let's exchange news," the matter will be settled very readily. Sometimes the guest stays in the home of his *inamorata* and at night slips into her bed or vice versa. On other occasions the affair will dispense with words, merely making symbolic gestures such as touching her breast or catching her leg. If these gestures encounter no rebuff then the woman's consent is assured. These symbolic gestures remind one of those connected with marriage ceremonials. The offer to smoke together is a parody of the *conferratio* rite. The touching of the breast and the catching of the leg at present do not appear in the marriage ceremonial of the Gilyak, but they are still found among several tribes of North America. Thus Profs. Boas and Teit refer to the existence of such rites among the Lilloet Indians [125].

Married and elderly men indulge in the same frivolities as the bachelors when visiting strange villages. During one of my first journeys through the country, there was among my companions an aged and respectable man called Gibel'ka. He was known throughout the island for his wealth and intelligence. During our sojourns in the various villages, he like our youthful companions spoke with zest about the local beauties. Once he was so smitten that he asked me whether he should purchase a girl who so pleased his eye that he wanted to take her along. All this despite the fact that he had been married a long time and always spoke with the greatest enthusiasm about his wife. It is true that he did not participate in the nocturnal adventures of the younger fellow travelers, but this was due to the fact that competition was already so hot that a gunfight had almost occurred among the younger men.

The violation of women is rare because of their relative accessibility. I was told, however, of certain incidents. During the season when women are far from their homes, picking berries or gathering sarana [*Lilium tenuifolium*], gangs of boys may raid the unprotected women. If the women do not surrender, violence is used. This consists of tearing of their hip-breeches which, as among the Chukchi and the Koriak, are made without any openings.

Similar invasions and romantic excursions outside the circle of related women have a special term, *shankh nanigind*, that is, “woman hunting.” This term is also used for searching for a bride. The word *nanigind* has two meanings: to hunt, and to search for something or somebody in general.²

The special expeditions into strange and distant villages in search of women are, of course, exceptional and amateurish adventures, particularly because in the distant villages newcomers generally meet with powerful competition from the local youths. The women have their own local admirers, not to mention their husbands. To succeed in a strange village one must therefore be endowed with special qualities. I happened to meet some of these lucky fellows. They are usually sophisticated storytellers, good jokers, and singers.

Although this type of Don Juan is rare even among the Gilyak, they have a special term for him.³ The unmarried youths are usually content with the women of their village and those of their *akhmalk* (fathers-in-law) villages. There, as we already know, they are ever welcome.

It is difficult to depict the sexual life of the Gilyak in general terms. We must first of all make a distinction between bachelors and married men. The latter, when at home, are more concerned with the protection of their own wives from intruders rather than with indulging in extramarital flirtations. Only when away from home do they readily give free reign to their sexual instincts. The married women, on the contrary, are constantly tempted by group-husbands and strangers. Thus on every convenient occasion they violate their marital faith, the more easily because not all women marry for love or men of equal age, something compensated for by extramarital affairs. In accord with Gilyak attitudes on decorum, however, these flirtations are not abnormal because they occur mostly between group-husbands and group-wives. Rightly or wrongly, one must award the palm for excellence in the extramarital arts [*pal'ma pervenststva v otnoshenii ektsestov sredi zhenatykh*] to

² [**Editor's note:** Handwritten inserts to the AMNH Russian typescript use both *nanigind* and *nanygynd*. Shternberg, *Giliaki*, uses *nan'gynd*, while Shternberg, *Sem'ia*, uses *nang'nd*. On Sakhalin in 1995, Gilyak (Nivkh) language speakers Galina Lok and Aleksandra Khuriun advocated *nanigind*. Since the Gilyak language is written down so rarely, wide variation continues to exist between the transliteration system created by Kreinovich in 1931 using the Latin alphabet, Kreinovich's later 1936 Cyrillic system, the Cyrillic system proposed by Vladimir Sangi in 1981, and other idiosyncratic phonetic variations, such as those used in the Nivkh-language newspaper, *Nivkh Dif* (1990–1996). While Lok, Khuriun, and others occasionally argued to change terms, the more common response was to leave the AMNH Russian and English typescript variants stand by default, less for their accuracy than for the confusion caused by the Gilyak-language words used in Shternberg, *Sem'ia*, which was the edition I took with me to Sakhalin. Notably, the handwritten inserts to the AMNH Russian typescript of this chapter resemble neither those of Shternberg, unless illness had unsteadied his hand, nor Kreinovich.]

³ [**Editor's note:** No special term was known to Nivkh women with whom I discussed the Shternberg manuscript in 1995, although the AMNH Russian typescript left a space blank for this word to be inserted. Only the AMNH English typescript and Shternberg, *Sem'ia*, invoke Don Juan for what the AMNH Russian typescript and Shternberg, *Giliaki*, denote as “the successful lover.” Later in this chapter, the AMNH English typescript used “Don Juan” to replace what the AMNH Russian typescript termed, “Lovelace,” after the character in Samuel Richardson's novel, *Clarissa* (Boston: Samuel Hall, 1795).]

the women. As the Gilyak saying goes, "Good men are rare, but good women are nonexistent."⁴

The real sexual excesses take place among the unmarried young. Here we find such extravagances as the case of the Gilyak woman Pigunaiko, mentioned earlier, who before her marriage had affairs with 14 lovers during the same period, including her future husband. Or to take another example from a Gilyak epic: One day a man came to the home of an elder to take the elder's daughter for a wife. The future father-in-law said to him, "Your future wife lives in that small yurta. People have been visiting her, copulating continually with her. As a consequence, she has lost her legs." The bridegroom, however, was not in the least disturbed. "Never mind," he said, "I will take her all the same!" He did not find anything extraordinary in this case, although such a tale cannot be considered as exemplary. Along with sensuality and great sexual freedom there are restraining factors such as motherhood, household duties for the married women, and love and shame among both married and unmarried women.

But in general sexual laxity plays a not insignificant role in the life of the Gilyak, having both economic and psychological consequences. Ordinarily, the Lovelaces who devote most of their time to romance rarely establish families, or if they do, their households are managed most carelessly. The sharp scolding of youths by their elders for laziness resulting from too many love affairs is encountered both in the life of the people and in their epic poetry. Childless marriages are explained by the Gilyak as due to sexual excess. The saddest effect of all, however, is on the psyche of the people. An array of nervous diseases specific to these people, such as *miarechenie* among both men and women—illnesses connected with a total loss of psychological self-control—are the result of such laxity. Among women these diseases are accompanied by serious disturbances of the sexual sphere, often leading to hysterics [126].

LOVE AND JEALOUSY

Together with intensive sensuality and sexual freedom, sentimental love exists among the Gilyak and plays an important part in their life. Most widespread is the term *esmund*, which designates love of children, love of friends, and sexual love. There is a special term for reciprocal love, *osmund*, and for love in marriages, *osmurkir*, *vav'nd*. There are several other terms for love such as *khyivynd*, but none designating "beloved," although it is possible to say *es'mula nigivin* (person who is loved). Lovers call each other either "husband" and "wife," or else "my man" and "my woman" (*n'oz'amits*, *n'an'kh*).

The Gilyak consider love a normal stage of life which must be passed through by everyone in his youth. This sentiment is very well expressed in a song which I recorded on the Amur. A girl complains about her mother for scolding her because she is in love. She sings the following:

⁴ [Editor's note: This loosely captures the meaning of the Russianized maxim, "*Sredi muzhchin, eshche odin-odin khoroshii naidetsia, sredi zhenshchin, ni odnoi.*" The maxim appears to contradict what Shternberg reports at the start of chapter six, that Gilyak men are the less faithful of the sexes.]

Mother, mother, mother dear,
Can you have really forgotten your own youth?

[Literally: You have forgotten your own past. Leave me alone!].

Children are never scolded by parents for their amorous passions. If sometimes they hear their elders grumbling, it is only because of economic considerations; young people tend to become careless, sloppy, and neglectful of their work when they are infatuated. In general it is forbidden to interfere in any way in the love affairs of the young people, even of young girls. Fathers and brothers can do nothing to the seducer of their daughters or sisters, not even challenge him to a duel. They are not even allowed to be angry with the girl. The infatuation of children is considered perfectly natural; the mother is often the confidante of her children. In many of the songs I recorded on the Amur, the sons always turn to their mothers with their romantic problems and ask for advice as to how and where to find a sweetheart.

Serious and active protests on the part of the parents, at times even of a merciless nature, occur only in cases of love between persons of prohibited categories. In such cases, the daughter is encouraged to commit suicide by the parents themselves. Often the parents, especially the father, are pitiless when the love of a daughter interferes with profitable marriage arrangements which had been made when the girl was a child. In such cases the girl is married off against her will to a person she does not love. Such instances are, however, exceptional.

Love among the Gilyak does not differ in character from that of civilized society. Crude sexuality is totally absent. In their love life one finds the complete gamut of this universal emotion, from the very tenderest tones of poetic sentiment and gentle anguish, to the most tempestuous impulses of heroic passions braving all obstacles, not hesitating to part with life itself. These feelings are well expressed in their love songs, particularly those of the women. Nature has endowed the Gilyak woman with a depth and subtlety of sentiment which she knows how to express in touching images and forms.

Night and day I think about you . . . I look out for you as if for my own mother . . . If you will go away I will think only of you . . . Where you pass I too will pass . . . I will drink your black shadow from the well from which we drank together . . . As in the woods one likes the best tree, so among all the other men you are the finest and most beautiful . . . O, take me along! . . . I want to become the pouch for flint and tinder which hangs on your belt . . . I will be the bottom of your boat, only to be with you . . . My left tear runs and falls like rain. My right knee weakens and becomes immobile. My legs no longer move.

In such expressions picked at random from various love songs does the Gilyak woman proclaim her love. The songs of the men sound the same sentimental notes. Comparable are frequent mentions of left and right tears knocking like rain on the knee, of anguish at parting, and of sweet dreams of a love tryst. One comes across such expressions as "I fell completely in love with you." Rarely one hears vulgarities, from our point of view, such as, "The joint under the knee of your plump thigh is twitching. O, how I like it." But there is never any cynicism [127].



FIG. 17. Two Gilyak men, 1890s. Photo by Lev Shternberg.
 Source: AAN f. 282, o. 2, d. 158, l. 1.

The abundance of sentimental songs indicates the role love plays in the life of the Gilyak. Not everyone can tell stories or recite poetry, but love songs are known by all. It is the language of lovers. When they meet, lovers sing to each other improvised songs instead of speaking. If they cannot see each other, they send songs of their own composition through a third person, *ad hoc*. There are special terms for such songs.

The intensity of love among the Gilyak can be judged from the reactions of lovers when there are hopeless obstacles in their way. Suicide seems to be the only solution. Most of the obstacles are put in the way by parents who because of greed for a bride-price, or unwillingness to break an infant betrothal, marry her off by force. Sometimes the girl is abducted. In such cases the woman tries at first to escape from her despised husband, but in case of failure she commits suicide, sometimes long after her marriage. I remember a characteristic case which occurred in the village Nianevo, where a girl was married off against her will. Soon after, she escaped to her father. The latter turned her over to her lover, tempted by the opportunity to receive a second bride-price. But the first husband wasn't reconciled to this situation and at the first opportunity took her away by force. Half a year later the unhappy woman hung herself. There are known cases where a woman escaping from a despised husband killed all the children she had had from that marriage. The men defend their rights to women energetically. Usually they attempt with the help of clansmen to take the woman by force; however, they do not stop at killing the husband of the beloved.

In the same village of Nianevo occurred an extraordinarily heroic love affair. During my stay there, a Gilyak named Nyngun was the wealthiest and most

respectable person in the village. His beloved was forcibly married to another man. He killed his rival, and was arrested and taken to Nikolaevsk. In the meantime the brother of the widow again married her off by force to someone else. Escaping from jail, Nyngun immediately started for the village of his beloved. Near her yurta he took off all his clothes, except his penis sheath, and naked, notwithstanding the winter cold, entered the yurta, which was packed with people. All were so terrified by his resolute appearance that no hand was raised as he easily carried off his beloved. He lived with her for many years. Before her death she succeeded in sewing for him four fox and four sable coats.

The most tragic of all obstacles to love is when the lovers belong to prohibited categories. Here there is no way out. The parents themselves insist on suicide. Usually the lovers go to the woods and hang themselves side by side on the nearest trees. Before dying they sing songs to each other in which they celebrate their way to another world where nobody will disturb their love. Sometimes these songs reach us, for it happens that sometimes one of the participants falls from the tree and loses the desire to repeat the experience. In this way the death songs are preserved for succeeding generations [128].

One such tragic instance grew into a popular legend. It occurred about a hundred years ago. A young girl had intercourse with her father's young brother. Soon after her lover left on a long trip to Manchuria to buy goods. In the meantime she was pregnant and could not keep her secret any longer. She committed suicide by hanging. When her lover returned he burned all his goods on her grave, freed the bear which he had fattened for the feast, and hung himself. The song she sang during their parting was preserved.

Take me with you. I will become the planks on the bottom of your boat
 . . . Now I can only think about the Land of the Dead [*Mlyvo*]. That you
 may remember me, keep the earrings hanging on your wall.

Magic means are used for unreciprocated love. The dried brain of the cuckoo is mixed with tobacco and offered to the girl to smoke, or a feather of this bird is secretly sewn into the girl's dress. But there are other charms which are not quite so innocent and often end tragically. Anyone tasting these medicaments, it is said, falls into a heavy melancholy and dies within a few days. I knew two Russianized Gilyak men who were selling these medicines for high prices and by these means had killed several women.

There are among the Gilyak, as amongst ourselves, timid persons who do not have the courage to declare their love personally. There are old women who act as intermediaries. They are given presents (*pai*) for their services. Sometimes presents are sent through them to the beloved, usually a piece of cloth with several knots tied in it to indicate the number of days that will elapse before the lover will come to visit her.

There still remain a few words to be said about the qualities which the Gilyak consider as stimuli to love. First of all, of course, comes beauty, especially that of the face. The term *pot urland*, the Gilyak term for beauty, literally means "beautiful in face." It is remarkable that beauty is judged not only from one's own racial point of

view. Gilyak men and women alike admire Russian ladies. Gilyak women like even the blond and reddish Europeans. A good example is my friend Bronislaw Pilsudskii, a reddish blond, who was greatly admired by the Gilyak not only for his sympathetic attitudes towards them but for his attractive appearance. For this reason they always called him *pot urakhra*, or literally, "handsome by face." When he was leaving Sakhalin the Gilyak women dictated to him many songs confessing their love.⁵

In love songs, "skin white as birch bark," magnificent hair "smooth and braided till the waistline," graceful ("a head inclined to one side, smiling, he strides"), physical power, and stature "the trunk, a broad sazhen wide, with legs that sink into the earth to his very shins," are very much praised.

Elegance of dress plays an important part in the appraisal of a lover. In love songs, embroidered cloth with a multitude of copper pendants sewn on it (*mes'kram - ra watramra*) is much admired for women, as are a black dog's fur coat, a spotted seal skirt, and a richly trimmed forehead bound with squirrel skins for men. Summer dresses of black material are much admired on women, while the men show best in shirts made half of white and half of red or blue material.

Besides external beauty, moral qualities are considered. Men attract women by their bravery and solidity. A woman will say: "Your voice is like that of *urdla nivukh*" (that is, of a respectable man, an accomplished conversationalist or singer). Women captivate men by their special qualities. From early childhood the girl learns to speak melodiously and to give the face an expression of dreamlike coquettishness. The ability to sing is of great advantage to the Gilyak woman. In her songs she not only gently expresses her love but can also wickedly mock a despised suitor. Her sarcasm has no limitations: In one song she compares the nose of a despised suitor with a broken place in the ice or with an open door. She uses similar expressions to describe his clothing, dogs, harness, and so on [129].

SEXUAL PERVERSIONS

Many times I have asked the Gilyak whether or not they have such sexual perversions as sodomy and bestiality, but it seemed as if nobody had ever heard about such cases.⁶ Only in one village on the Tym' River was I told with great revulsion of a man suffering from a psychological illness who cohabited with a dog. How the Gilyak consider such perversions is evident from the following legend, which I recorded on the Amur. The tiger, panther, and even lion were once human beings. Accidentally the God Kur saw them copulating through the anus. Then he told them in great wrath, "As long as you are copulating like beasts (*na-navarand*) you shall

⁵ [Editor's note: The work of Bronislaw Pilsudskii, older brother of the Polish leader Iuzef, has been the subject of increasing study through the Pilsudskii Center at the Sakhalin Regional Museum, Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk, and the efforts of the Polish linguist, Alfred Majewicz. See Pilsudskii's works in the bibliography.]

⁶ [Editor's note: The subject of sexual variations in Siberian cultures has recently been explored in Marjorie Mandelstam Balzer's excellent article, "Sacred Genders in Siberia: Shamans, Bear Festivals and Androgyny," in *Gender Reversals and Gender Cultures*, Sabrina P. Ramet, ed. (London: Routledge, 1997), 164-182.]

be beasts for ever more." Thus, in the opinion of the Gilyak, these perversions make man resemble beasts.

The attitude of the Gilyak towards hermaphrodites (*miskund*, E.D.; *miskii*, W.D.) is quite simple. Their peculiarities are considered as simple anomalies. They are not despised and sexual intercourse with them is accepted quite willingly. The marriage of hermaphrodites is also not considered unusual.

In view of the fact that sexual intercourse and marriage of hermaphrodites on the one hand and homosexuality on the other are very often mixed up in ethnographic literature, I will cite some of the characteristic cases of hermaphroditism among the Gilyak. I know of two cases on Sakhalin Island. One was Chubuk who lived in the village of Iamy near Aleksandrovsk. He was known to be a hermaphrodite because until a certain age he considered himself a woman; his *membrum virile* was scarcely developed and he wore women's dress. In the course of time his *membrum virile* developed properly, and he began to dress like a man and at last married. The other case I came across in the village of Myi Girk on the extreme north end of the island on the western coast. There I once saw a man and a woman sitting together on the shore who turned out to be a married couple. The woman's features appeared to me somewhat to resemble those of a man. My companions explained to me that only a year ago the woman was wearing a man's dress and considered herself a man. And she was very friendly with her present husband. Once they went fishing together; they had to spend the night there. The woman told her secret and from that time they began to cohabit and finally married, although the man was strongly urged against taking the step. Such cases could easily be the source of legends of transformed men.

On the Amur a Gilyak named Putuk once told me some very interesting details about his friend who was a hermaphrodite. This person was a girl until a certain age. Suddenly she noticed that the *membrum virile* was growing, now increasing, now decreasing, and now disappearing entirely. She told this to her lover. The latter came secretly to her at night to convince himself and on the following day he told everyone about it. Several years later, she grew a beard and a *membrum virile* had definitely developed, although a vagina was also developed and she could cohabit with men. After that he began to dress like a man, then married, and was considered to be the best hunter in the region. He lived with his wife normally but sometimes copulated with men. The latter he appreciated more. He always spoke about himself with pleasure, "I have two chances, two happinesses." All considered him to be a good man, *urdla nivukh*. I have counted five such cases among the Gilyak, the same number found by Prof. Bogoraz among the Chukchi.

PUBERTY

The Gilyak do not have any ceremonials in connection with the coming of puberty. The only sign of a girl's having passed puberty is that her hair is worn in two braids. The time of girls' maturity is reckoned from the appearance of the first menses. Usually they begin at 13 or 14 years of age, and this time is considered as the beginning of matrimonial age. The term *put indind shankh* designates a woman

arrived at the age of puberty, although it literally means, "woman who saw her body," which is to say that her breasts have developed to a degree where she can see them. There is a similar term for men, *put indind nigivin*, or "man who saw his body," but in this case the word *ut* (body) designates mustaches [130].

Before the appearance of menses a girl is prepared by her mother for the coming change in her life. She is initiated into all the laws and taboos connected with menstrual blood. The meaning of menses as the moment of puberty is recognized by both sexes, and until that moment no sexual intercourse is permitted. Often a man marries an underaged girl and sleeps under one blanket with her, but cohabitation begins only after she tells him of the beginning of her first menses.