

**THE SOCIAL ORGANIZATION
OF THE GILYAK**



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PREFACE

[1–10; 1–10; —; —]¹

I SPENT ABOUT 7 YEARS, interrupted by few intervals, doing fieldwork among the primitive peoples of Sakhalin and of the Amur region, particularly the Sakhalin Gilyak.²

I became interested in this study when late one winter I found myself involuntarily on the solitary shore of the Tatar Strait, about 100 kilometers from Aleksandrovsk, near the small settlement of Viakhtu.³ Here, not far from a Russian settlement consisting of five houses of exiles who had finished their terms of servitude,

¹ [**Editor's note:** Page sequences at the beginning of each chapter refer to approximate page numbers for the same or similar material in four separate Shternberg publications: the undated AMNH Russian typescript; the undated AMNH English typescript; Shternberg, *Giliaki*; and Shternberg, *Sem'ia*. For example, the numbers below the Preface heading show that this preface is found in the AMNH typescripts only.]

Although the translators of this and most chapters in the book are not precisely known, clues lead to some process of elimination. An undated explanatory note entitled "To Shternberg's Manuscript," filed in the Boas Collection in the Department of Anthropology of the AMNH observed that this preface, as well as the introduction and chapters 13–23 (in this edition, chapters 11–16), had not yet been translated into English. The note, signed, "W.J.," likely indicated Boas' frequent correspondent Vladimir I. Iokhel'son (a.k.a. Waldemar Jochelson, 1855–1937). Presuming that Boas asked Iokhel'son to make a review of the manuscript's status after it had been with the Museum for a time, one can venture that Alexander Goldenweiser, who through his correspondence was in contact with Boas regarding the Shternberg manuscript only on receipt of Shternberg's first installments in 1912, was not the translator of these sections. Iokhel'son's review of the manuscript most likely took place after his emigration to the United States in the early 1920s and before Bogoraz' graduate student Julia Averkieva arrived in New York and began work on the translation of chapter 14. See appendix A for more correspondence on the manuscript at this time.]

² [**Editor's note:** "Primitive" can be derived from either the Russian *primitivnyi* or the more ambiguous *pervobytnyi* (which can also mean "early"); here Shternberg used the former.]

³ [**Editor's note:** Earlier versions of the text spell this variously as Viachty, Viaxy, and Viakhta. The northwestern Sakhalin coastal town is now known as Viakhta, but I have retained its original designation from the 1890s for the logic and consistency of Shternberg's narrative. For this and other place names on Sakhalin listed in this preface, see Konstantin Makarovich Braslavets, *Istoriia v nazvaniakh na karte sakhalinskoi oblasti* (Iuzhno-Sakhalinsk: Dal'nevostochnoe Knizhnoe Izdatel'stvo, 1983); and Sviatozar Demidovich Galtsev-Bizuk, *Toponomicheskii slovar'* (Iuzhno-Sakhalinsk: Sakhalinskoe Knizhnoe Izdatel'stvo, 1992).]

were several Gilyak yurtas.⁴ These Gilyak had entirely preserved their old ways and morals in spite of their contact with Russian neighbors. It was here that I was ethnographically baptized.

The surrounding taiga, rich with reindeer moss, attracted the reindeer-herding Tungus [Evenki] and Orok [Ul'ta],⁵ whose camps lay scattered around the settlement, not many versts⁶ away. During the summer these herders descended from the mountains to the summer camps of the Gilyak on the seashore and scattered their picturesque conical tents nearby. Here on the broad pasture at the mouth of the Viakhtu River, the representatives of such different tribes as the deer-breeding Tungus and the dog-breeding Gilyak organized annual rendezvous. This close proximity of three tribes differing in language, customs, and beliefs gave me an opportunity for making a comparative ethnographic study. It was a particularly favorable location because our settlement stood on the main route along which sped Russians from Nikolaevsk, Gilyak on dog-harnessed sledges, and Tungus and Orok on the backs of deer or in their primitive sledges.

Settlers traded with the natives in flour, brick-tea, alcohol, and other prisoners' chattels [*skarb*]⁷ for sable furs and reindeer meat. The settlement on the solitary shore of the Tatar Strait consisted of a post office and a sentry house established for overtaking fugitives and vagrants. There I lived as a political exile in pleasant company with the guards—a soldier and three watchmen, former convicts. It was the central gathering place for transient natives. Occasionally they spent several days with us, and in exchange for tea and bread they let me into some of the secrets of their primitive life. Among these representatives of three different tribes, the Gilyak, being the least known, interested me particularly. I knew that the scientific expeditions of von Schrenck and later observers had collected a considerable amount of material on the ethnography of this tribe. But since my predecessors were naturalists I thought that they would have paid less attention to the social and spiritual life of the people than to the external ethno-anthropological peculiarities. This proved to be the case, although the works of von Schrenck, and particularly those of Grube published in

⁴ [Editor's note: Yurta (from the Russian, *iurta*) originally designated a tent made of animal skins, found across central Asia and Siberia. By the late 17th century, the term came to denote any non-Russian type of dwelling.]

⁵ [Editor's note: Modern self-namings for Tungus and Oroks are given here in brackets. Throughout the text I defer to Shternberg's usages in the AMNH Russian typescript, while acknowledging their later Library of Congress referents both in the text and in the prefatory glossary of ethnonyms. Ian Koshkin discussed 1930s variations within the particularly extensive category of Tungus in Shternberg, *Giliaki*, xxxiiin (a footnote on page xxxiii). For more on the politics of self-identification among Orok/Oroch/Ul'ta, see Heonik Kwon, "Maps and Actions: Nomadic and Sedentary Space in a Siberian Reindeer Farm," Ph.D. diss., Univ. Cambridge, 1993.]

⁶ [Editor's note: The verst (from the Russian, *versta*) was a prerevolutionary Russian measure of distance equal to 3500 feet or 0.6629 miles. Five hundred "sazhens" (from the Russian, *sazhen'*), each equal to 7 feet, made up a verst.]

⁷ [Editor's note: All italicized terms in editorial square brackets are Russian translations from the AMNH Russian typescript; italicized terms in authorial parentheses are Shternberg's Gilyak translations from the same edition.]

1891, were not accessible to me in the wilderness.⁸ I read them only after my return to St. Petersburg in 1900.⁹

Despite my complete ignorance of the language, I was struck from the very beginning by the terminology used by the Gilyak when addressing relatives of various categories. Children addressed by the common name of *imk*, mother, not only their own mother but also all her sisters, and wives of the father's brothers. Similarly, with some variations, they addressed their father and all his brothers as *tuvng*.¹⁰ Brothers' children addressed one another by the word *tuvng* (in German, *Geschwister*).¹¹ Brothers' wives called each other sisters. In a word, I had before me the terminology which is known to exist among primitive tribes in other parts of the world, and which characterized a peculiar form of family organization that Morgan identified as classificatory.

As the scope of my observations was small, I decided to verify my generalizations by further investigations and a census of the Gilyak. By means of the census I could examine the terminology of relationship and the family relations with greater certainty. For that, a competent interpreter was necessary, one able to understand my questions and the answers of the natives, as well as to be sufficiently liked by the natives to overcome their natural hostility and distrust against a census. Such an interpreter was found in the person of Obon, a Gilyak from the Tonki settlement.¹² The wealthiest man of his tribe, enjoying great fame for this wealth and skill, and famous for his intelligence and arts of oratory, he enjoyed great popularity among his tribesmen. (He learned a great deal from long association with Dr. Suprunenko. It was with Obon's help that Suprunenko obtained his rich natural, historical, and ethnographic collections.)¹³ Although Obon's knowledge of Russian was very poor, he fully compensated for it by great zeal and an active intelligence.

⁸ [Editor's note: Shternberg refers to Vladimir Grube, *Linguistische Ergebnisse I. Giljakisches Worterverzeichniss nebst Gramm. Bemerkungen. Anhang zum III Bande*; and Leopold von Schrenck, *Reisen und Forschungen in Amur-Lande in den Jahren 1854–1856*, 3 vols. (St. Petersburg: Eggers, 1860–1900).]

⁹ [Editor's note: For a brief English-language survey of 19th century literature about Sakhalin Island, see Bruce Grant, *In the Soviet House of Culture: A Century of Perestroikas* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1995), ch. 3.]

¹⁰ [Editor's note: While Russian versions of this text use *tuvn*, Shternberg's transliteration guide in the AMNH archives and Gilyak (Nivkh) readers on Sakhalin in 1995 indicate that the last "n" is more properly represented by the English diphthong "ng."]

¹¹ [Editor's note: This reference to the German, as well as others later in this edition, are taken from the AMNH English typescript only. Lydia Black has pointed out that the problem in comparing *tuvng* to *Geschwister* is that *tuvng* designates not only children of one father but also children of one's father's brothers, lineal and collateral, in all degrees of kinship.]

¹² [Editor's note: Prior to the arrival of Soviet government on Sakhalin and the Amur in 1925, Gilyaks bore only single, one-word names. After 1925, officials began giving Gilyaks Russian names, patronymics and surnames. Paradoxically, at the same time as the Soviet government denied Gilyaks use of their personal names, it introduced formal use of the autonym Nivkh.]

¹³ [Editor's note: Petr Ivanovich Suprunenko was a doctor for the Sakhalin prison administration living in the village of Korsakovka, outside Aleksandrovsk, and later, Korsakov. Between 1881 and 1891 he collected ethnographic and zoological materials on the island. His work is discussed in Boris Polevoi, "Sakhalinskaia kollektsia P. I. Suprunenko," *Vestnik Sakhalinskogo Muzeia* 2 (1995): 144–155.]

On February 6, 1891, on two sledges harnessed with dogs—one for myself with provisions for a month and another for my interpreter—we started on our first voyage over Sakhalin Island. Our expedition created an alarmed sensation among the Gilyak. The fear that the census might have fiscal significance in connection with yasak [fur] taxation,¹⁴ or the recruiting of soldiers, shut the mouths of the natives and immediately caused a hostile attitude toward us. The eloquence of my interpreter, however, overcame all these obstacles: He introduced me as a friend of the Gilyak who wished to find out all the needs of the people in order to help them.

As the news about “the friend of the Gilyak” spread and overtook us with the speed with which all news spreads among the natives, we met with friendly confidence and a willingness to answer all our questions throughout the rest of our voyage. The census gave me an opportunity to investigate their kinship terminology and to make many interesting observations of other aspects of the life of these people. During the winter, the Gilyak live most intensely. Life in the settlements of northern Sakhalin, where living conditions are more favorable, presents the most interesting field for observations.

The success of my first census inspired me to undertake in 1891 a similar investigation among other tribes of Sakhalin. I selected the Tym’ River and the eastern shore of Sakhalin, from Cape de la Croyere, a territory inhabited by Gilyak, Tungus, and Orok. The most fantastic legends circulated among the Russians and the Gilyak of the western shore about the Gilyak of the eastern shore. They were called the “black Gilyak,” and all kinds of vices were attributed to them. It was said that they were wild, thievish, inhospitable, and inclined towards cannibalism, that whenever they caught a vagrant they shut him into a hovel, fattened him with dried fish [*iuko - la*], and then killed him and arranged a feast. I believed there was little truth to these legends. Constant communication existed between the Gilyak of both shores, and the “black Gilyak” whom I saw during my census did not differ in any way from their “white” fellow tribesmen [*soplemenniki*]. Furthermore, the territory of these Gilyak had been visited before by several travelers. But at the time the legends were so strongly rooted that when I departed, the news spread that I had been killed. When I returned to Aleksandrovsk, the governor of the island was about to send a detachment to the scene of the crime.

The fact is that my journey was most successful. In the beginning of June, as soon as the flow of spring waters of the Tym’ began and navigation on that mountain river became possible, I set out in the usual Gilyak dugout boat made of poplar,

¹⁴ [Editor’s note: Yasak (from the Russian, *iasak*) was a levy imposed on indigenous Siberians by Russian imperial overseers. On paper, it was the obligation of every native male aged 15 and older to provide a fixed number of designated fur pelts or the ruble equivalent once a year to the Russian state. Whole communities often shared yasak debts collectively, as well as inherited them. Although some peoples such as the Chukchi rebuffed their yasak burdens, the overall toll was enormous. In the 1640s alone, almost a third of the entire revenue of the Russian state came from the fur trade. For more on yasak see Grant, *In the Soviet House of Culture*, 42–44; George Lantzeff, *Siberia in the 17th Century: A Study of the Colonial Administration* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1943), 19–24; 96–99; Marc Raeff, *Siberia and the Reforms of 1822* (Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press, 1956), pt. 2; and Yuri Slezkine, *Arctic Mirrors: Russia and the Small Peoples of the North* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1994), 7–90 (*passim*).]

in company with three Gilyak youths who, for a small payment, consented to act as my fellow travelers and guards. I did not have my old interpreter with me, but as I already had some experience with the natives, and since I had heard that the eastern Gilyak knew about me, I hoped to inspire their confidence.

The banks of the Tym', one of the largest rivers of Sakhalin, once so lively were now quite solitary. The Gilyak population, which moved at the end of the winter to the seashore to hunt seals, had not yet returned, so that during the 4 days of our journey we passed through completely deserted country. Only towards the end did we begin to meet the dugout boats of Tym' River Gilyak who were returning to their homes in time for the first salmon run. Fatigued, they looked like beached salmon themselves.

The first meeting with the "black Gilyak" in the settlement Nyivo completely dissipated whatever fears I had about them. After 2 days in the village we quietly started making the necessary preparations for the sea voyage. The territory settled by the natives is very limited. Summer navigation along that shore was not very convenient. The Sea of Okhotsk is so stormy at that time of the year that the Gilyak will not risk launching their shells. North of Nyivo communication is carried on through lagoons, but the latter are so shallow that traveling is possible only at spring tide.

Southerly travel is possible only on foot or on deerback. It is interesting that in this small area of Sakhalin, Gilyak fishermen and the majority of the reindeer-herding Orok live side by side. Traveling the entire month, partly by water and partly on deerback, I was able to visit all the inhabited parts of the territory and take a detailed census of the population, while continuing my observations on their life and beliefs. With the appearance of salmon [*keta*]¹⁵ and the season of continuous rain, we started homeward along the Tym'. It took us 11 days full of hardship and privation; our provisions were exhausted and the banks of the river were full of bears. But the endurance and patience of my companions overcame all difficulties, and we finally returned to our Russian Palestine.

The winter of 1892 was passed in quiet, sedentary [*statsionarnaia*] work. I was visited by the Gilyak from neighboring settlements and through discussions with them I gradually completed and corrected my previous observations. During that winter, I grasped for the first time the intricacies of the Gilyak language. In spite of these two trips and a long association with the people, my knowledge of their language was rather poor. I had learned to ask some questions and to control the answers to the interpreter to a certain extent, but a thorough knowledge of the language seemed impossible to acquire; the grammar and phonetics seemed so difficult that I gave up all hope of ever learning it. During my first trip, I collected material through an interpreter with great difficulty because the interpreter himself knew very little Russian, and it was necessary to explain the meaning of every question. I was fortunate, however, for soon after I met an exceptionally intelligent Gilyak interpreter in

¹⁵ [**Editor's note:** Shternberg refers to the general Russian word *keta*, or salmon, in the AMNH Russian typescript. The dominant species found off the shores of northern Sakhalin are *Oncorhynchus gorbuscha* and *Oncorhynchus keta*.]



FIG. 8. A Gilyak man and woman in the tunics worn by both sexes up to the Soviet period. The bear fur worn by the man would have been worn in winter during bear festivals. Photo by Lev Shternberg. *Source:* AAN f. 282, o. 2, d. 162, l. 88.

the person of Gibel'ka. Possessing natural gifts which were sharpened in constant barter with Russians and other natives, he was made, as it were, for this difficult role.

Gradually, by translating short stories, I began to understand the phonetics and etymology of the Gilyak language. I was able to write down a considerable number of their poems, which gave me an opportunity for objective analyses of the psyche and beliefs of these primitive people.

During the winter lull I also decided to go more deeply into Gilyak grammar. Applying the most recent methods of self-instruction in foreign languages, I wrote down a short tale and, gathering several Gilyak men who were familiar with Rus-

sian, asked them to make a literal translation for me. And so a key was found. In spite of the great phonetic difficulties the obstacles were gradually overcome.

In 1893 I decided to make another trip. This time I wanted to see that part of Gilyak territory I had not visited before, south of Aleksandrovsk toward the Ainu region. It stormed continuously throughout the trip, but towards the end of the month I finally reached the southernmost Gilyak settlement at Cape Saturnai. My efforts to reach the nearest settlements of the Ainu were frustrated at that time because a typhoon suddenly arose and swept away our tent with all provisions. I was forced to return to Aleksandrovsk.

Thus I visited all the Gilyak settlements on Sakhalin and took a general census. Now I was ready to settle down and assess my material, but a study of the Gilyak people without any knowledge of the life of their neighbors seemed useless. During the next summer I carried out my original plan and visited the Ainu.

We started in a dugout boat along the Poronai River. On reaching the sea I turned first eastward and took the census of the Orok and Ainu in the region of Toroiki Lake. Then gradually returning in a southwesterly direction towards the Bay of Patience, I traveled from settlement to settlement close to Tunaichi Lake. From Naibuchi, I traveled by land to Korsakovsk. From here I again went to Naibuchi and then to Port Manue; crossing to the western shore I reached Port Kosunai. Then I proceeded to Mauko, after crossing the ridge, arrived on a raft at the mouth of the Litogi, and along the latter traveled down to the Russian settlements of the Korsakov district.

In the summer of 1894, I traveled once more along the western shore to Cape Mariia. My goals were to check up on my census to find out the rate of mortality during the past few years, investigate the question of the salmon run, and find out whether there had been a stone age on Sakhalin. The last days of that trip almost ended in calamity: the motorboat sent to me from Aleksandrovsk was caught in a typhoon and almost sank in the waters of the Tatar Strait together with all my collections, which included a particularly large collection of stone age implements gathered on the sand dunes of the northern shore.

After I had finished my work among the Gilyak and their neighbors on the island, I decided to move to the continent in order to familiarize myself with the Gilyak of the mainland shore and Amur region, as well as with their neighbors of Tungus origin. For this reason I undertook three expeditions during 1895: first a general excursion along the Amur and Ussuri, then the territory of the Oroch in the bays of Imperatorskaia Gavan' and down the Tumil River, and finally the continental Gilyak along both banks of the Amur from the mouth to the gulf and northward along the seashore to the settlement of Kol'. After that, I returned to Sakhalin to continue my study of the Gilyak language and folklore.

On the first two voyages, I became familiar with the Gilyak of northern Sakhalin and with the Orok and Tungus scattered among them. On the next trip I studied the Ainu of the whole southern shore, and also the Tungus and Orok around the mouth of the Poronai. Investigating every phase of the life of these tribes, I was particularly interested in the religious and social organization, language, and folklore of the Gilyak.

Learning first the grammatical construction and phonetic peculiarities of the Gilyak language, I recorded many texts in various Gilyak settlements. The majority, however, were written down in the region of Aleksandrovsk and the settlement of Rykovskoe. Consequently these texts are written in the Tym' dialect, which is most primitive and especially important because the people speaking it are the most isolated of the Gilyak tribes and have therefore preserved much more of their original creativity.¹⁶

Among the Gilyak there were many storytellers, but generally they could only repeat stories that they had been told. Real poets who improvised were rare. They were usually exceptions—shamans or children of shamans—mostly persons of great sensibility and imagination to whom creativity was an absolute necessity. They recited their poetic improvisations while in a trance, at the end of which they would fall into complete exhaustion. Not only were there few such individuals, but still fewer enjoyed the good health and patience for dictating word by word epic poetry of anywhere from two to three hundred stanzas. On meeting such an individual I naturally tried to get as much material from him as possible.

I was very fortunate in finding one such poet improviser, a youth called Koinyt, the son of Ada, a deceased shaman of the Tym' region.¹⁷ He was as poor as Job, alone, and homeless, rich only with the hopes of a future life. He claimed to have inherited two souls from his father, who had had four, and was entirely obsessed by his calling. He saw visions, had bouts of hysteria, improvised, and sang his songs. The Gilyak were very eager for his poetry and would listen to him through whole nights. They would present him with dry fish and other foods. The youth lived with me for several months, pleased with a warm corner and abundant food, singing his poems and dictating them to me.

In the spring of 1897 I returned through Siberia to European Russia. Once more in 1910, from May to September, I visited Sakhalin and the Amur region.¹⁸ What follows are my studies based on these two sojourns.

¹⁶ [Editor's note: Today most Gilyaks (Nivkhi) refer colloquially to the "Eastern dialect" and the "Amur dialect," where the Amur dialect includes West Sakhalin speech (here, the "Western dialect"), since before the establishment of Soviet administration on North Sakhalin in 1925 many Gilyaks traveled between the Amur River delta and the northwestern coast of Sakhalin, which directly faces it. The two dialects are intelligible to each other, but not greatly so. Some linguists recognize two other dialects: the "Tym' dialect" of the Tym' River valley, which Shternberg refers to here, and the "Schmidt dialect" of Sakhalin's uppermost northern Schmidt Peninsula. For more on Gilyak/Nivkh linguistic terms, see the works in the bibliography by Robert Austerlitz, Bernard Comrie, Erukhim Kreinovich, Galina Otaina, and Vladimir Z. Panfilov.]

¹⁷ [Editor's note: Shternberg's high praise for the young, shamanically inclined Koinyt echoed that of Bronislaw Pilsudskii (1886–1918), the Polish exile ethnographer and younger brother of the Polish leader Iuzef Pilsudskii, who also worked with Koinyt as a young man. Such character references held little sway 40 years later when the first Gilyak language literacy primer, *Cuz Dif* [Gilyak, *New Word*] singled out "the kulak shaman Koinyt" for persecution in the USSR of 1932. See Grant, *In the Soviet House of Culture*, 88, 93, 95; Kreinovich, *Cuz Dif* (Leningrad: Gosudarstvennoe Uchebno-pedagogicheskoe Izdatel'stvo, 1932); Bronislaw Pilsudskii, "The Gilyaks and their Songs," *Folk-lore* 34 (1913): 483. Although references in the Russian versions of this passage are to "Koipyta," this appears to have been either a pseudonym (not used for other Shternberg informants) or an error in transliteration.]

¹⁸ [Editor's note: During this second 1910 stay, Shternberg spent 2 weeks on Sakhalin and the remaining time on the Amur. From the archive of Kreinovich, SOKM, Iuzhno-Sakhalinsk.]