

The Discovery of the Koryaks and Their Perception of the World

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The first information that we have about the Koryaks was reported in 1669 by Sosnovskij, the administrator of the small fortified town of Okhotsk, who had heard of them from the Tunguzian people. The first true ethnographic data were gathered only in 1700, when Atlasov (1935 [1891]), who had left the fortified town of Anadyr in 1697 to explore new territory, discovered Kamchatka and collected interesting information about the population of that peninsula, in particular the Koryaks. This was the beginning of a long period of exposure.

Without doubt, it was the "second Kamchatka expedition" (1733-1746) that supplied the most useful elements for the study of this region and its population. Valuable ethnographic material was assembled by one of the expedition members, Krašeninnikov, who was at the time still a student but later became the remarkable scholar of whom we know today. He spent four years (1737-1741) on the peninsula, staying with the Koryaks of Karaga and Palana and receiving additional reports about other Koryak groups from his informants. His *Description of Kamchatka* (Krašeninnikov, 1755) deals with the population, material culture, religious ceremonies, marriage rites, funerary rites, and more. His comments on the relationship between the culture of the Koryaks, who were reindeer herders, and that of the Chuckchee are of great interest. His linguistic material, in particular the vocabulary of the Koryak reindeer herders of Avacin and the island of Karaga, is of inestimable value to investigators.

The work of another member of this expedition, Steller (1774), contains some notes on the Koryaks. Unfortunately, the material on Koryak marine mammal hunting has not been published (Miller, 1937 unpubl.). In 1788, the French consul de Lesseps, who was participating in the La Pérouse expedition, spent some time with the Koryaks, and in 1790 he published the diary of his journey (de Lesseps, 1790). His observations may seem superficial, but some deserve attention, especially his description of Koryak encampments.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, Ditmar, mining engineer to the governor of Kamchatka, spent five years (1851-1855) carrying out a geological survey of the region. During the course of his work, he became interested in the way of life of the Koryaks with whom he came into contact. Furthermore, he was capable of using what he learned from officials, merchants, and others who lived among the autochthonal people, and from official statistics. He wrote an article

(Ditmar, 1855/56) concerning the problems of social organization of the Koryaks. The notes in his diary were not published until 40 years later (Ditmar, 1890/1900).

During the second half of the nineteenth century, the name of Kennan, member of an expedition organized by the Russo-American Telegraph Company (1864-1867), stands out. His book *Tent Life in Siberia* (Kennan, 1870) contains some original observations on the way of life of the Koryaks. Other sources include a two-volume work by Sljunin (1900), which gives a geographical and economic description of the country, and the publications of Resin (1888) and Margaritov (1899). Along with the work of Krašeninnikov, it is undoubtedly the Jesup expedition (1900-1902) which was of greatest scientific value in the discovery and study of this small population. This expedition was organized by the Natural History Museum of New York in collaboration with the Saint Petersburg Academy of Science. Its object was to study links which may have existed between the populations of Asia and North America. To pursue this, it was decided to make a study of all aspects of the population of the Far North of Siberia.

The celebrated ethnographer Jochelson directed the group, which concentrated on the Koryaks. His team worked for a year among the inhabitants of the bay of Penžina. It was then, at the beginning of this century, that the first folklore texts were collected and the Koryak language was studied in greater depth. Jochelson edited a two-volume monograph published in English (Jochelson, 1905-1908), which provides an admirable description of the economic life, material culture, and religious ceremonies of the Koryaks. Even now, this description remains the most complete picture we have of traditional Koryak society.

The leader of a detachment working on the Anadyr River, Bogoraz, was also a student of the Koryaks. During the winter of 1900-1901, he visited most of the villages of the west bank; on the east bank he stayed with the Koryaks of Karaga and Aljutor, and from there visited the Kereks, a people close to the Koryaks and long confused with them. He studied the dialects of these different groups and worked on the linguistic material reported by Jochelson (Bogoraz, 1917, 1922). The work of the Jesup expedition was continued by another expedition (1909-1911), organized under the patronage of Rjabušinskij and led by Jochelson. Again, the aim was to clarify possible connections between the populations occupying the two sides of the

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Bering Straits, and there was also a plan to study the population of the Aleutian Islands. The expedition worked in Koryak territory at the end of 1910 and the beginning of 1911, assembling much ethnographic data on the reindeer herdsman of the Tigil region. The Koryaks of Tigil were also visited during the 1920s by the members of the Swedish Botanical Expedition (1920-1922) directed by Bergman (1926).

During the year 1922, Vladimir Arsen'ev, the celebrated expert on the Soviet Far East, known through his book *Dersu Uzala*, worked among the Koryaks of Gižiga and other peoples along the edge of the Sea of Okhotsk. His data primarily concerned the economy of those regions (Arsen'ev, 1925). In effect, the fledgling Soviet government wanted to change the entire economy and way of life of these small northern populations, and all its energies were concentrated in a new body, the Committee of the North, created in 1924. This committee was to send to the Great North, including Kamchatka, many experts — doctors, teachers, government officials, and young ethnographers from Leningrad University. All the new data were eventually published in journals such as *Northern Asia (Severnaja Azija)* and *The Soviet North (Sovetskij Sever)*.

Of all the publications concerning the Koryaks between 1924 and 1930, when the "Koryak National District" was founded, the most important was probably that of Beretti (1929), on the Koryaks of Penžina, Aljutor, and Karaga.

The census taken between 1920 and 1927 was accompanied by new ethnographic material which enabled accounts to be published dealing with different groups — sedentary Koryaks and nomad Koryaks of the bay of Penžina (Bauerman, 1928); Koryaks of Palana, Karaga, Aljutor, and Chavchoven (Šavrov, 1927); and Koryak reindeer herdsman of the Tigil region (Orlova, 1929).

Coincident with the foundation of the Koryak National District was the organization of the Cultural Centre (Kul'tbaza) of Penžina, through which the government intended to form a new, socialist "Koriakia" by combatting the "state of ignorance" of these people with their "unhealthy" beliefs, and the "pernicious" influence of their shamans. However, thanks to the texts collected by Jochelson (1905-1908) at the beginning of the century, and others collected by Stebnickij in the 1930s and Žukova and Vdovin in the 1950s and afterwards, it is possible to have a fairly precise idea of the Koryak perception of the world, a perception totally non-dominating but, in fact, very structured.

Like every other human being, the Koryak sought an explanation of the creation of the world and of its organization. In the oral literature, one character appears in story after story, playing the dual role of creator and organizer. This is Kujkynnjaku, the Raven, helped in his task by the members of his family: his wife Miti; his sons, particularly Ememkut; his daughters, principally the eldest, Yiñe'a-ñe'ut; and finally his nephews and nieces, of whom we know two names, Illa and Kilu'. The Koryak Raven is generally invested with the characteristics of an ancestor or patriarch; he is sometimes labelled as an old man or grandfather. For example, he is called Ačičen'a'qu (the great-grandfather) by the sedentary Koryaks of the bay of Penžina. But the reindeer herdsman of the

Taigonos peninsula call him Tenanto'mwan, the Creator, because in the Koryak mind this hero is not only their ancestor, but also their creator. Some aspects of the myth are, in fact, genuinely etiological, such as the acquisition of fresh water. The Raven asks a ringed seal (or sometimes a crab) to carry him on its back to the creatures of the sea — whales, walrus, and seals. These creatures offer the Raven blubber but repeatedly refuse him fresh water, consenting only when the hero promises them his daughter in marriage (Meletinskij, 1974). In certain versions, after drinking the water, the Raven spits it out to make the rivers.

The role of creator in Koryak mythology seems to be shared with a superior master-spirit who inhabits the sky. This Supreme Being is sometimes identified with the sun or the moon, sometimes with the dawn, or with the universe. He is known by various names, whose translation is significant: "the place of existence" according to Stebnickij; "the universe", "nature", "the examiner", "he who is on high", "the essence of things", "dawn", and "the beginning", according to Jochelson (1905-1908). The existence of several names would seem to imply that, initially, the notion of a Supreme Being covered a number of Beings and natural phenomena which were gradually incorporated into a single entity. This Supreme Being lives a completely real life, with wife and children, in the world above.

The direct children of this Master of the Sky are the People of the Clouds. Family life and romance are subordinate to them, which explains why lovers often addressed themselves to the People of the Clouds. Also under their jurisdiction is the stability of the weather, and hence the results of fishing and hunting at sea. This Master of Masters sent Kujkynnjaku to earth to establish order.

Kujkynnjaku, master of things on earth, is able to bring into submission all human beings, all animals, all objects, and all the phenomena of nature. He knows, for example, how to calm storms or rain: he cuts the hair of the Mistress of the Weather and removes her clothes after having appeared to her in a boat-sledge drawn by mice (Meletinskij, 1974). In the same style, Kujkynnjaku goes to see the Wind Man, and the mice have only to gnaw the harness of the Wind's sledge to quell the storm (Jochelson, 1905-1908).

The Raven often marries his children to the Mistress of the Weather, to the North and South Winds, and also to the People of the Clouds. In this capacity, he plays the role of social organizer, and by means of choosing different sexual partners for his children he gradually makes the group pass from endogamous to exogamous marriage.

Incest between brother and sister is found in Koryak mythology, but only rarely. On the other hand, marriage between first cousins is a common occurrence; the couples Ememkut and Kilu', and Yiñe'a-ñe'ut and Illa, appear in many legends collected by Jochelson. It must be remembered that among the Koryaks, marriages between first cousins seem to have been allowed until the eighteenth century. In oral literature, this state of affairs is not always permitted to continue. Ememkut, husband of his cousin Kilu', marries a second or even third time; his wives include the Grass Woman, The Cloud Woman,

the Marmot Woman, and the daughter of the Sun Man; Yiñe'a-ñe'ut, for her part, marries the Cloud Man, a seal, a bear, or a dog. Thus the stories of the multiple marriages of the children of the Raven, the cultural hero of the Koryaks, marked a new stage in social evolution. As a result, new links could be established, essential links with the forces of nature, with animals, and finally with members of other human groups.

The Raven, creator and organizer of the world, is also the protector of the tribe. It is he who knows how to find food for his family and thus for mankind in general. In many myths, Kujkynnjaku, thanks to his strength or his cunning, achieves a successful hunt or a good catch of fish — permanent and even obsessive occupations and preoccupations of those people lost in the immensity of the tundra.

It is he also who cares for the sick threatened by evil spirits. These spirits, if one may judge by the numerous legends in which they appear, must have played a very important role in the life of palaeoasians. Among the reindeer-breeding Koryaks, the spirits are known as Ninvits, among the sedentary Koryaks of the Bay of Penžina, as Kalas or Kélés, or (more rarely) Kamaks. Their numbers are impressive and their identities are much more concrete than those of the master-spirits. They can make their bodies grow larger or smaller at will and can change themselves into living beings, human or animal. A detailed description is given by Bogoraz (1904-1909). Their way of life is very similar to that of man; they are divided, as are the Koryaks, into sedentary hunters of marine animals and nomadic reindeer herdsman, but the sedentary Ninvits use bears instead of dogs and the nomadic Ninvits breed wild sheep instead of reindeer. They often behave like humans; they are acquainted with fear and, unlike the Masters, are mortal. Some of them inhabit a subterranean world and visit the dwelling-places of men at night, when in their lower world it is day and the spirits feel courageous. They always enter houses by the fireplace and immediately occupy all the available space. Others live on earth, in the land where the sun sets, in dwellings similar to the Koryak semi-subterranean houses.

These evil spirits attack men for several reasons. The first and most obvious is that these maleficent beings are anthropophagous and need human flesh and blood. Sometimes they are sent by the Supreme Being, or by other evil spirits, to go among men who have to be punished for refusing to offer sacrifices or for having violated certain taboos, and also when, for example, the age of the population must be altered by reducing the number of the old and replacing them with newborns. The result of all these visitations is, of course, sickness and death. A Koryak says of a sick person that a Ninvit is eating him. The Ninvits eat the patient's body, either from the outside in the case of illnesses such as scabies, ulcers, and various sores, or from the inside when the illness affects the organs. Certain spirits can provoke illness simply with their poisoned breath. In attacking, the Ninvits have recourse to the same weapons as man: hammer-, axe-, or knife-blows to the head provoke neuralgia; bites cause swelling; arrows cause death.

Death — which, for the Koryaks, was only a temporary state — could result from an attack by evil spirits. The dead could even on occasion become "ninvit", and thus present a grave danger for the living, which led to the myriad of precautions taken by the Koryaks to protect themselves against possible contagion. They struck knife-blows, for example, at a dead body before burning it, in order to kill the Ninvit possibly lodged within: sometimes the entire body was cut into pieces. As a protective measure, someone watched over the body until the cremation ceremony, after having carefully tied the feet together and covered the face.

After the funeral rites, precautions were taken to prevent the dead person from finding his way back and recognizing his next of kin. For this reason the relatives of the deceased coated their faces with soot, put their clothes on inside-out, made their way home by a roundabout route including numerous diversions, and finally passed over glowing embers. The part of the house where the body lay was guarded for ten days after the ceremony by a relative or by simple wooden "guard" figures.

The Koryaks were so haunted by evil spirits that they strove to protect themselves from them in many other circumstances. In October, for example, the Koryaks' return to their winter quarters gave rise to a ritual in which the people donned

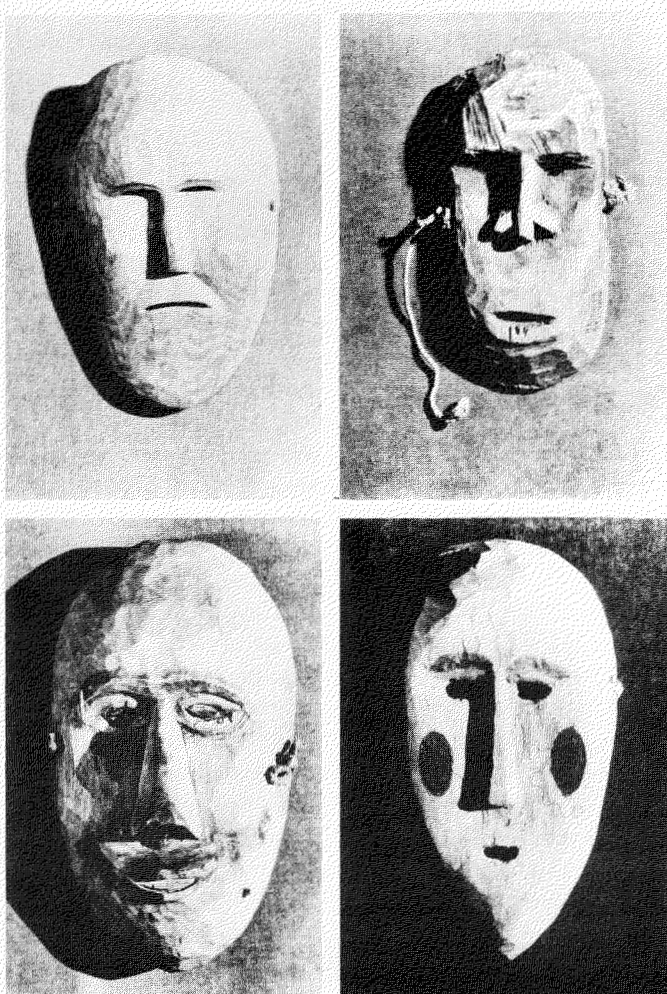


FIG. 1. Masks of the peoples of Siberia (Ivanov, 1975).

wooden masks (Fig. 1) symbolic of or representing the Raven. By these means they hoped to frighten away any evil spirits who had taken up residence during their absence. The practice of tattooing was also a means of magical defense against attack by the Ninvits. Finally, they practiced a ritual often cited by ethnographers: the sacrifice of dogs. Once killed, the dogs were placed on stakes, muzzles pointing upwards; beside them, arrows decorated with scraps of cloth were driven into the ground (Antropova, 1976). The howls of the sacrificed dogs were believed to awaken the Supreme Being, who would then use the arrows provided to kill the Ninvits, bringers of disease. To mislead the Ninvits, the Koryaks kept for them a piece of meat taken from a sacrificed animal, and the animals' blood was spread around while magic words were uttered. It was believed that the Ninvits or Kalas would thus not take complete possession of their victim.

To combat the evil spirits, Kujkynnjaku the Raven uses his power as a shaman, or uses the help of amateur, or more rarely, professional shamans. In Koryak society, professional shamanism initially did not really exist; instead there was a form of family or "domestic" shamanism, as recounted by Jochelson (1905-1908) and Bogoraz (1917). This shamanism could be practiced by anyone. Each family kept a drum for use in domestic rituals, sacrifices, and other ceremonies: everyone could thus have a try at shamanism. The truly professional shaman was to appear later. The Koryak name for a shaman is "eñeñalan", which means "a man inspired by spirits".

The principal attribute of a shaman was the ability to pass from one world to another; he could descend to the "subterranean world" or ascend to "the sky". During the mythical era of the Raven, men also possessed this power. Communications with heaven and hell were later interrupted, but the Koryaks do not specify the reason. The shaman alone was capable of restoring these links with other worlds. He somehow understood the mystery of the rupture of the levels, a mystery known by Kujkynnjaku. Communication between cosmic zones was rendered possible by the trichotomous division of the universe envisaged by the Koryaks.

The Koryak shaman, helped by protecting spirits, had the power, as we have seen, to fight the evil Ninvits. To this end, he had to discover in which part of the patient's body the evil spirit was settled. He cut open the body at the appropriate place and drew out the spirit of the disease, having previously prepared a figurine made of grass, flesh, or wood, symbolizing the spirit of the disease. The shaman could thus withdraw a Ninvit through the top of the skull of the sufferer, or pull out arrows shot by the Ninvits and embedded in the man's body. Thanks to their power as healers (sometimes a shaman even managed to restore the soul of a dead man to its place and thus resuscitate the dead), shamans, in all Koryak oral literature, aid the hero Kujkynnjaku in his struggle against the negative elements of the universe.

In many narratives, the power of creator, or of saviour, is explained by the use of simple tricks based on illusion, trickery, or perfidy. In these cases, the Raven appears to have lost all power as demiurge and is reduced to the role of a trickster. However, the fact remains that the acts of a demiurge, even

when they appear as the tricks of a mythological rogue, have a collective and cosmic significance: they provide indirect information on the origin of light, fire, fresh water, or other elements.

The creation of the world was incomprehensible to the Koryaks without the idea of a first ancestor during the primordial era. Thus we find the notion of "ancestor" in the naming of particular places, sacrificial sites, where investigators have discovered heaps of hunting instruments such as bone and stone arrowheads, horns of wild reindeer or wild sheep, skulls of walruses and brown bears; in some places there are signs of sacrificial fires. These are known as "appapil", which is the Koryak word for "grandfather" or "ancestor", and as "yllaapil" — "grandmother" or "ancestor", although the latter name is much more rare. Each site was the symbol of the founder of a family or of a community. Each had its "guardian", in the form of a column of wood, sometimes with an anthropomorphic representation crudely carved at the top.

These tangible remains only confirm what study of the oral literature has revealed: it seems that the notion of "ancestor" dominated the Koryaks' attempt to understand the world in the first era of their history. Confronted by chaos, man in primordial times attempted to establish order. He tried to understand how things began and hence gave a first meaning to the world. In offering a world signifying human experience, the myth developed a wisdom to live by.

We know that Plato proposed that the future citizens of his ideal republic should be initiated to literary education by the telling of myths rather than through hard facts and rational teaching. We know, too, that Aristotle, the master of pure reason, said: "He who loves wisdom, loves myths". We can understand these attitudes if we consider as did Eliade (1963), those particular stories, the myths, as "models from human behaviour, which allows them to give by this very fact, a sense and a value to life." In effect, the people of archaic societies, through repetition of rites, an implicit mythology, endeavoured to recreate that which happened *ab origine*; at the same time, by recounting legends, the explicit mythology, they made themselves feel capable of doing as their gods, heroes, and ancestors did *ab origine*. To know the myths, for the people of these societies, was to learn the secret of the origin of things. For us, knowing the myths helps to elucidate a stage in the history of human thought and perhaps also to discover a facet of history, the story of a people who have kept their way of life and thought virtually intact until the twentieth century. We must not, however, consider these people as vestiges of the past: they are instead the irreplaceable witnesses to a manner, different from ours, of perceiving the world.

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