

THE BURDENS OF PRIMITIVE COMMUNISM

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Introduction

Gilyaks (Nivkhi, by Russian twentieth century nomenclature) are famous for their indigenism. Like Maasai, Nuer, Trobrianders and Yanomami, they became famous in the ethnographic literature of their country as models for theory, ideology and method – foils for an understanding of the world at large. But such frame brings a price. Relative to their work elsewhere, the Soviet government invested disproportionately extensive resources in programs designed to modernize and re-educate their high profile Gilyak subjects. In this article, I track how 5000 Gilyak fishers and hunters on imperial Russia's far eastern shores became seen as the early USSR's "truest proletarians" in the eyes of their most famous anthropologist, Lev Shternberg. A striking illustration of the fortunes of political ideology, Shternberg's life and work illustrates how early Marxist kinship studies took a Pacific people and made them a hallmark of primitive communist life in the Russian imperial imagination. In turn, Nivkhi of the late 20th century reflect back today on the political burdens of having been among the foremost subjects of Soviet ethnographic literature.

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In 1889, Lev Shternberg, a Russian law student who had been exiled to Sakhalin Island for his participation in an anti-tsarist terrorist organization, met a Gilyak man on the street in the small Sakhalin town of Aleksandrovsk. "I saw a disheveled Gilyak shaman," he entered in his fieldnotes, "with matted gray hair and a strange cordial smile. Small boys surrounded him, shouting 'Look at the old shaman, he'll tell your fortune!'" (Shternberg, 1933a: xiii). Shternberg didn't know how to respond, but he remembered the shaman's expression as he walked by. So began one of Russia's most famous ethnographic encounters. From that first meeting, Shternberg went on to produce a corpus of writing on Gilyak life that easily compares to Franz Boas' "five-foot shelf" on the Kwakiutl and Bronislaw Malinowski's epics from the Trobriands. Like his foreign colleagues, he has enjoyed the reputation as a famous ancestor for the generations of anthropologists he trained and influenced. Yet looking back on Shternberg's work today, what perhaps stands out is not even just what he wrote, but how his work has come to mean so many different things to so many. Shternberg's *Social Organization of the Gilyak*, now published as the last monograph of the Jesup North Pacific Expedition series and Shternberg's most extensive work in English translation (Shternberg, 1999), began as a spirited defense of the idea of group marriage first put forth by the American ethnologist Lewis Henry Morgan. To Shternberg's students and colleagues in late imperial and early Soviet Russia, it became a model ethnography for a nascent field. For Soviet social engineers in an age of rising Stalinism, it became a chronicle of everything that needed to be eradicated from Gilyak life. And for Gilyaks themselves, Shternberg's *Social Organization* articulated with strange prescience a politics of primitive communism that influenced how others viewed them for decades.

Who was Lev Shternberg? Born in a small town in Ukraine in 1861, he began his career in the radical Russian movement, *Narodnaia Volia* [The People's Will], advocating violence in the service of the Russian socialist cause. When banished for his activism to Sakhalin Island on Russia's Pacific coast in 1889, he turned exile to advantage in eight years of ethnographic research. Together with colleagues Vladimir Bogoraz and Vladimir Iokhel'son, he became a popularizer of the long-standing but little known Russian tradition of protracted, polyglot field studies. He was a scholar of

kinship, religion and psychology. A passionate and charismatic teacher, he trained the Soviet Union's first generation of ethnographers. An energetic institution builder, he oversaw the transformation of St. Petersburg's Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (the *Kunstkamera*) into one of the world's leading ethnographic collections. So, at the turn of the century, when American anthropologist Franz Boas was looking to build the publications of the Jesup North Pacific Expedition (1897-1902), it was not surprising that the St. Petersburg museum recommended Shternberg as one of their most promising ethnographers.

The book that emerged from Shternberg's Jesup contribution, *The Social Organization of the Gilyak*, began as a central contribution to North Asian ethnography, but in its theory and argument it came to represent much more than that. In Russian ethnography, it reigns as a leading example of how anthropological theory created new realities for the native peoples they embraced.

When Shternberg was first sent to Sakhalin in 1889, he had gained a cursory education in kinship theory and evolutionism from a fellow prison inmate in Odessa who had read him aloud Friedrich Engels' book, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*. The book was a detailed commentary on American scholar Lewis Henry Morgan's work on kinship systems and the rise of civilization, and its influence over Shternberg lasted throughout his career. When Shternberg began his studies of the local Gilyak population on Sakhalin in 1891, he wrote excitedly, "I've found a kinship terminology and clan system just like that of the Iroquois and the famous Punalua family of the Sandwich Islands, in a word, remains of the marriage form Morgan based his theory on.... At first I was scared to believe it... but as I went from *yurta* to *yurta* and from family to family making my census, I asked everyone how various kin members are called and who has rights to whom. Then I became convinced" (Shternberg, 1933a: xii).

From his fieldnotes, Shternberg was clearly taken by his discovery, one which eventually led him on a theoretical excursion through the rise of restricted cross-cousin marriage (Shternberg, 1891b-1897). Scholars from Morgan to Rivers to Engels and Freud had postulated an evolutionary paradigm of human social organization, beginning with incest, leading to a generalized "cousin marriage," or "sister-exchange," and later the kind of more complex systems such as the form of matrilineal cross-cousin

marriage Shternberg described at length for Gilyaks. With Morgan's theories of group marriage coming under attack, first from the Scottish juror J. S. McLennan in the 1890s, and later more subtly from Boas himself, Shternberg saw the *Social Organization* manuscript as a detailed defense of Morgan's arguments. "What Morgan based on speculation," Shternberg wrote enthusiastically, "we find fully realized among the Gilyak." Shternberg offered an emblematic illustration of the role of mother's brother in the generalized exchange of women, and an early milestone in the development of prescriptive alliance theory.

Still, what actually did Shternberg discover? To be sure, in Shternberg's time, Gilyaks used formal terms of address that were complex enough to confuse even themselves, and requiring a lifetime of mastery. But did this constitute, in the very confident way we find in Shternberg's work, such a juridical edifice? As David Schneider once wrote, whether we are reading Evans-Pritchard or Lévi-Strauss, Meyer Fortes or Edmund Leach, the tremendous constructedness of the kinship idiom rarely comes into play.

Fortes says quite clearly that for the Tallensi the ideology of kinship is so dominant that all other modes of relationship are assimilated to that ideology. Leach affirms that kinship is not a thing in itself but rather a way of thinking about the rights and usages with respect to land for the villages of Pul Eliya. They were there. They saw it. They talked to the natives. But just what did Fortes and Leach and Evans-Pritchard actually see and hear? [Schneider, 1984: 3]

Schneider's work, along with other critiques of kinship that followed Rodney Needham's cardinal 1971 collected volume, have not diminished kinship's role within anthropological thought so much as return us to the roots of kinship studies as a metaphor for anthropology itself (Needham, 1971; cf. also Bourdieu, 1977; Collier and Yanagisako, 1987; Faubion, 1996; Goody, 1990). Reading Shternberg today, a hundred years after his fieldwork, we have cause to reflect on kinship's shifting terrain; for whether the anthropological reader has ever heard of Gilyaks or not, Gilyak kinship will be both strange and familiar. On the one hand, after a dizzying round of explanation at one point in *Social Organization*, Shternberg concedes that "for the European," the language of Gilyak kinship "naturally produces a sense of total confusion" (Shternberg, 1933b: 108). But it is also a language which became emblematic of anthropology's efforts across the

20th century to systematize our knowledge of other worlds. In the post-Soviet age, we can also reflect on Shternberg's work along with Gilyak readers (Nivkhi, by modern nomenclature), and ask how they look back on their own century of being represented both inside and outside anthropology's purview.

Shternberg's route to Sakhalin

Lev (Khaim) Iakovlevich Shternberg was born on May 4, 1861, in the Ukrainian town of Zhitomir. His childhood friend Moisei Krol' remembers their Jewish neighborhood as crowded, with rundown, one-story wooden homes, and his young companion Lev as energetic but intensely shy with strangers (Krol', 1929). Their early life, as recounted by Krol', was filled with books, camaraderie, and a powerful mix of Judaism and mysticism. Zhitomir itself was isolated for that time, located some 30 miles from the nearest railroad and without a dominant industry. By the time of Krol' and Shternberg's adolescence, however, Krol' paints a quiet, provincial life grown increasingly turbulent with the disappearances and arrests of older friends who had left Zhitomir to take part in revolutionary activities.

Along with a young Vladimir (Natan) Bogoraz, Shternberg and Krol' became members of the revolutionary movement Narodnaia Volia's "Central Student Circle" when they entered the University of St. Petersburg in 1881. Yet, by 1882, the movement was already in decline under government siege. By the end of their first year in the imperial capital, police sent Shternberg and Krol' back to Ukraine for having participated in student demonstrations. Shternberg enrolled in law at Novorossiisk University in the Odessa a year later, continuing to rise within the movement's ranks and becoming editor of its journal, *Vestnik Narodnoi Voli* (Taksami, 1961a: 108).

For Shternberg the risks in such work were evident. Between 1879 and 1883, amidst thousands of arrests, the government held over 70 trials to indict Narodnaia Volia members, sending some 2000 people to prison. Eventually, authorities arrested Shternberg himself in April of 1886 after an elderly female street vendor he had recruited for the distribution of literature was exposed by the police (Krol', 1929: 229). Shternberg spent 3 years

in the Odessa Central Prison before the court sentenced him to 10 years of exile on Sakhalin Island.

It was on Sakhalin, Shternberg would later write in his Jesup manuscript, "that I was ethnographically baptized." In his "Russian Palestine," "A grim land!" where the sea was "eternally stormy," and where the true inhabitants were "bears, powerful winds, punishing hellish blizzards and destructive hurricanes," Shternberg began his investigations of local Gilyak life (Shternberg, 1999: 3-10). Shternberg's Narodnaia Volia comrade-in-exile, Vladimir Bogoraz, himself sent to the Kolyma Peninsula, later coyly described Shternberg's decision to study Gilyak as "owing to the leisure time we all enjoyed then" (Bogoraz n.d.: 110) underscoring the unlikely boost that banishment gave anthropology in Siberia as well as the Trobriand Islands. However, it was more likely the practical interests of the Sakhalin administration, who saw in Shternberg's restlessness someone to both organize a census of the island's Gilyak population and appoint a network of native officials who would report to Aleksandrovsk authorities (Shternberg, 1891a: 48; 1933a: 112). In February of 1891, the prison administration allowed Shternberg to undertake what would be the first of dozens of excursions to Gilyak communities across North Sakhalin (Shternberg, 1933a: 22-23; 1999: 3-10). It was a new kind of rural invasion [*khozhdenie v narod*] for Shternberg, but one for which he was ironically well suited, given the very Narodnaia Volia background for which he had been imprisoned.

Gilyaks and group marriage

Like many indigenous peoples across Siberia in the late 19th century, clan affiliation structured a great deal of Gilyak political, economic, social, and religious life. There were roughly two dozen active clans among Sakhalin Gilyaks during Shternberg's eight years there. While only one clan or lineage ideally prevailed in a given village, in practice mixed settlements had made the system more complex by the late 1800s. Shternberg studied kinship systems and dozens of other topics, remarkably rich in detail, creating a corpus of literature on Siberian indigenous life that many ethnographers have since envied. However, what makes the literature on Gilyak life so striking? Shternberg's *Social Organization* being no exception? is

the shifting tides of what counted as useful or important knowledge from one political era to another. This was perhaps most evident in the Soviet period, when Shternberg's posthumous editors published his careful work on the clan system "to ensure the liquidation of patriarchal clans" (Shternberg, 1933a: xxxvi). With the regnant intellectual trends at the time of Shternberg's field research, it was Gilyak kinship structure and its implications for burgeoning socialist theories of egalitarian primitive society that rose to the fore.

Shternberg's descriptions of the Gilyak kinship system were famously labyrinthine: Gilyaks were exogamous, in that they married only outside their lineage in a complex system of reciprocities that bound together, in Gilyak terms, the wife-givers and the wife-takers (Black, 1972; Lévi-Strauss, 1949; Shternberg, 1933a, 1933b, 1999; Smoliak, 1975). But what made Gilyaks unique, Shternberg claimed, was a triangulated system of marital exchange, based on a tri-clan phratry or alliance group (from the Gilyak, *pandf*) which underwrote a complex web of mutual social and economic obligations. Following Morgan's terminology, Shternberg charted Gilyak kin relations under the heading of "group marriage," since he found the Gilyak kin system to be remarkably similar to the Punaluan system in Hawaii which Morgan had documented. According to the classificatory nature of Gilyak kin terminology, any married man or woman had several potential "husbands" or "wives" from his or her marrying generation. As a result, "all men of a given lineage had rights of sexual access to women of their own generation in the wife-giving lineage," and by the same token, women had the same access to men of their own generation in the wife-taking lineage (Black, 1973: 34). In practice the system was a loose kind of monogamy: Many Gilyak men and women initiated discreet but permissible affairs, particularly with visiting guests; and under more formal circumstances of levirate, widowed women often married their husband's younger brother. Nonetheless, public displays of affection were uncommon and most Gilyaks considered it indiscreet to discuss extramarital activities in public (Shternberg, 1933a: 169; 1999: 66-72; Kreinovich, 1936). The crucial moment here is the reference to group marriage, for, according to Morgan's taxonomy, any group still practicing group marriage could only fall under the category of savagery. While it is easy to berate 19th century scholars (and socialists) for their presumptions of savage practice, we often fail to remember that the imprimatur of kinship studies stood behind them.

When Engels came upon Shternberg's first field report from Sakhalin in the Moscow newspaper *Russkie Vedomosti* in 1892, he seized upon the case as an example of group marriage still extant, and had it translated into German for reprinting within days. Shternberg's account was important for Engels not only because it suggested the existence of group marriage in general but because the perceived backwardness of Gilyak life resonated so well with his and Marx's evolutionary framework. What made the Gilyak case relevant was that, in Engels' view, "It demonstrates the similarity, even their identity in their main characteristics, of the social institutions of primitive peoples at approximately the same stage of development" (Engels, 1972: 239). What was good for Morgan, by association, was good for Marx and Engels' evolutionist theory of class struggle. Hence, that Gilyaks were proven to be a primitive people with backward customs became one of the building blocks in the edifice of Russian socialism.

The fortunes of group marriage as a descriptive category in early twentieth century were at best mixed. After initial heady discoveries in Australia and India (Fison and Howitt, 1880; Rivers, 1907; Spencer and Gillen, 1899), critics set about questioning whether marriage itself performed identical functions – from rights of sexual access to a web of juridical obligations for maintaining local stability – in all settings (Hiatt, 1996: 40-41, 46-47).

The new critiques notwithstanding, the most important figure working against Shternberg's argument for Gilyak group marriage was perhaps Boas himself, who chiseled away at the Morganian evolutionary stages in his 1911 book, *The Mind of Primitive Man*. While conceding that similarities could be found across early human societies, Boas pointedly wrote, "The theory of parallel development [advanced by Morgan], if it is to have any significance, would require that among all branches of mankind the steps of invention should have followed, at least approximately, in the same order, and that no important gaps should be found. The facts, so far as known at the present time, are entirely contrary to this view" (Boas, 1927 [1911]: 182). Unexpected similarities in material and social systems, Boas argued, had obscured the differences, which followed from a multitude of causes and consequences.

In the years after Shternberg's death in 1927, further critiques diminished much of the group marriage debate, at least in the way Morgan had framed it. In his 1941 *Structure and Function in Primitive Society*,

Radcliffe-Brown described group marriage's place in evolutionary kinship theory as "one of the most fantastic in a subject that is full of fantastic hypotheses" (Radcliffe-Brown, 1952 [1941]: 59). While Radcliffe-Brown's own research in Australia conceded that classificatory kinship terms demanded certain levels of behavior appropriate to the imputed relation, fictive or real, he argued that there were clear distinctions, in every Australian society considered by Morgan, that asserted the primacy of the nuclear family. George Peter Murdock, in his canonic 1949 kinship guide, *Social Structure*, followed Boas in arguing that there was no direct relationship between kinship nomenclature and societal complexity (Murdock, 1949: 187). Lévi-Strauss, who published his essay on Gilyaks in *Elementary Structures of Kinship* the same year, remarked only that Shternberg was ultimately more observer than theoretician, subject to "rash historical interpretations" (Lévi-Strauss, 1949: 292, 301).

Whatever their fate in kinship debates abroad, for Gilyaks the die was cast. Their role as the quintessential savages of Engels' favor made them famous in Russian and Soviet ethnographic literature. Their personification of primitive communism, postulated by Morgan and elaborated by Engels, became axiomatic. What was lost in the process is that the report that found its way into *Russkie Vedomosti* was one of Shternberg's first, outlining a clan system which he would later come to recognize as far less fixed than he first had perceived it. Given the swell of non-Gilyaks into the area, the increasing dislocations through travel and trade, and the demographic havoc wrought by disease, he realized that much of what he had been presented was an ideal system. This realization later found confirmation in the work of Soviet ethnographers such as Anna Smoliak, who pointed out that intermarriage with Gol'd (Nanai), Tungus (Evenk), and Manchurian Chinese prefigured the character of many Gilyak (Nivkh) settlements in a way that made close adherence to the marriage rules described by Shternberg difficult. Anthropologist Chuner Taksami, himself a Nivkh, noted that actual examples of Shternberg's labyrinthine systems were few (Smoliak, 1975; Taksami, 1961b: 86, 110). That the clan system may not have functioned as methodically as suggested, that group marriage was not as licentious as it sounded, that Shternberg himself was not wholly loyal to the Marxian strain of materialism for which Engels had conscripted him (Shternberg once called Marxism "a hackneyed reworking of the Hegelian triad" (Shternberg, 1933a: xxi) – or that Gilyaks at the turn of the century

were far from an isolated tribe waiting to be discovered – were moments that soon came to be lost in a handful of popular and scholarly accounts that entrenched Gilyaks in an edifice of evolutionary theory.

Primitive communism in rising Soviet science

Actual Gilyak marriage practices were not the only casualties of the primitive communist matrix. Shternberg himself came under radical revision only years after his death in 1927. When Russian editions of the *Social Organization* text were published in two formats in 1933, Shternberg's graduate student, Ian Petrovich Koshkin, took his mentor to task for ideological oversights. While presenting Shternberg as "the best Russian ethnographer of his time," Koshkin also made it clear that that time was now past. What Koshkin described as Shternberg's "subjectivist" and "populist" education in the works of Kant and Spencer presented a special problem for his Soviet successors. Not only did Shternberg spend little time pondering the materialist causes of Gilyak class struggle, he praised the security and protection that more affluent Gilyaks extended to the less fortunate. "Inequality," he wrote of his time on Sakhalin, "...does not manifest itself here. A wealthy man owes everything to his personal abilities and virtues. His accumulations can neither exploit nor degrade another person" (Shternberg, 1999: 175). Class struggle indeed. In another remark on private property among Gilyak fishermen, Shternberg observed that "Communal possession generally leads to continuous strife" (Shternberg, 1999: 76). Here Koshkin countered that Shternberg's grasp of primitive communism was "completely incorrect," proposing that Shternberg misinterpreted signs of Gilyak life already corrupted by capitalist influence as earlier, more innocent forms (Shternberg, 1933b: xiv-xv). While Koshkin emphasized how Shternberg's theoretical understandings of kinship helped combat "social-fascist falsifiers of the history of primitive society," he relegated Shternberg's world view, in a scorching admonishment, to "the bourgeois ideas of an English tradesman" (Shternberg, 1933a: xviii; 1933b: xiii).

Koshkin was in a particularly awkward position because the fortunes of Morgan had risen so sharply in the Soviet 1920s. Indeed, many early Soviet planners looked to the new socialist state, in Morgan's words, as "a revival,

in a higher form, of the liberty, equality, fraternity of the ancient gentes" (Ssorin-Chaikov, 1998). Not surprisingly, then, many looked upon Siberian indigenous communities as "already socialist." G. Lebedev wrote in 1920 that Siberian peoples were "the truest proletarians," natural allies of the working masses (and socialist intellectuals), and deserving of special state assistance (Lebedev, 1920: 76). In the Sovietized understanding of Morgan, Gilyaks emerged even more clearly than before as living chronotypes, examples of a simpler past who would undertake a "stride across a thousand years," emerging from primitive society directly into socialism, bypassing slaveholding, feudalism, and capitalism along the way.

For Gilyaks of a century ago, there was much consequence in Shternberg's chance reading of Engels on the eve of his Sakhalin exile. The irony is that for someone who set out to produce a sympathetic portrait of Gilyak life, one of the results of his path through evolutionism was to scientifically buttress the broader vision of savagery held by so many of his contemporaries. Many Russian ethnographers besides Shternberg followed the terminology of the day by making similar claims to group marriage in Siberia in the later 1800s; however, as the anthropologist Peter Schweitzer has shown, few if any of the cases actually corresponded to Morgan's criteria. What so many scholars and travelers salaciously documented as group marriage more closely approximated extensive extramarital liaisons, and in some cases, prostitution. The process of Morganian classification was itself awkward in Siberia since, as in Chukotka for example, there were a handful of cases of virtually neighboring ethnic groups, effectively at the same "stage" of social development, with widely divergent kinship systems (Schweitzer, 1989). One wonders then how Gilyak life might have been perceived differently had their social organization not been foregrounded so prominently.

In her famous preface to Engels' *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, Eleanor Burke Leacock explained that modern materialists substitute the terms "food gathering" and "food production" for savagery and barbarism. This offers an improvement, but still demonstrates how arbitrarily certain groups could be classified. Gilyaks, who considered it a transgression to plow the land, did not grow their own potatoes or millet, but rather purchased them from the Manchus and Japanese. Would their status have improved if they grew their own foodstuffs rather than buying them?

As the USSR's truest proletarians, Gilyaks paid for this status through social engineering. Over the course of only six political eras from 1925 to 1991, the Soviet government organized an ambitious but constantly shifting program of modernization, where a broad range of native cultural icons (language, shamans, native dress, local cadres) were encouraged and then discouraged (Lenin), repressed (Stalin) and then rehabilitated (Khrushchev), ignored (Brezhnev) and then revived again (Gorbachev). In this 65 year period most Gilyak communities were relocated at least four times, often forcibly. In 1937 alone, the apogee of Stalinist terror, almost one third of Gilyak men disappeared in social hygiene campaigns, given their longstanding trading links with "counter-revolutionary" Asian neighbours, the Japanese, Chinese and Koreans. When Gorbachev announced that perestroika left Gilyaks [Nivkhi] free to resume a traditional way of life, many were left to ask what constituted tradition after almost seven decades of Procrustean cultural management (Grant, 1995a and 1995b).

Remembrance of Shternberg past and present

Why, ultimately, did classificatory kinship systems and the perceived customs of Gilyak group marriage so intrigue Shternberg? No doubt Shternberg's evident pride in building on the works of mentors such as Marx, Morgan and Engels give us the better part of this answer. For Shternberg the evolutionist, Gilyak group marriage provided a living illustration of where mankind had been at the very time when early 20th century Russia was debating where to go.

However, we would be remiss to not also remember that kinship as an idiom also helped keep private lives public since the second half of the 19th century. At once a high modernist charting of order and rationality, kinship charted blood ties which were "everywhere an object of excitement and fear at the same time" (Foucault, 1990: 148). Blood, which could be inherited (dynastically), shed (militarily) and corrupted (by association) was a ready symbol of power relations that were of increasing importance to 19th century colonial administrations.

Shternberg's Gilyak work hinged on a European evolutionist paradigm that we could trace, of course, further back than Morgan. "To be," was "to

become,” Hegel argued in his *Theses on the Philosophy of History* fifty years before Morgan, signaling a tradition of European Enlightenment consciousness so deeply rooted in change as a motor force of being that we can little contend to have broken away from it today (Hegel, 1988 [1840]). But with Shternberg’s work, as anywhere, knowledge was in the eye of the beholder. While Russian readers of *Social Organization* in the 1920s might have focused on its ethnographic contributions to an general evolutionist argument, by the 1930s Koshkin gave that evolution a distinctly Soviet twist, presenting Shternberg’s work as an important tool in the proletarian struggle against native backwardness.

For the modern reader, Shternberg’s algebraic kinship formulae, resembling at their apex permutations and combinations reminiscent of the high speed digital computing that Lévi-Strauss pledged would revolutionize myth analysis (Lévi-Strauss, 1963: 206-231), at times evoke high modernism more than marriage. Indeed, the functioning of Gilyak marriage rules *as a system* is perhaps what stands out most today, as it may have for Shternberg himself, who later in life conceded the simplicity of his original castings of Gilyak group marriage by writing, “I took them all for pure-blooded aristocrats” (Smoliak, 1975: 86).

Some modern Gilyak (Nivkh) readers of *Social Organization* have taken this admission one step further. In the summer of 1995 I took a Russian edition of Shternberg’s text to Sakhalin Island to interview eight Nivkh women on their impressions of Shternberg and his role in their later political fate. When I asked the Nivkh ethnographer Galina Dem’ianovna Lok whether Shternberg’s arguments on group marriage had any place in early 20th century Gilyak life, she replied:

At the simplest level, Nivkhi were different [from Russians] in the sense of the marriage rules that encouraged young girls to grow up in the family of their intended husbands. For example [in the 1950s], 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!

As an accountant from a North Sakhalin shipping port who had grown up in a Gilyak village in the taiga, Elizaveta Merkulova said:

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. [Shternberg, 1999: 214]

Yet, if the idea of group marriage has not held up well, Merkulova only smiled when I told her that parts of Shternberg's text left me feeling that I too, following his observation at one point in the manuscript, had fallen prey to "the almost hypnotic effect" of Gilyak kinship terms.

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...* and you say it knowing that everyone is connected to everyone else in some important way. [: 214]

Merkulova's response was a laurel branch to the uninitiated, but she also reminds us why kinship became such a regnant and often dazzling way of accessing other people's worlds, promising at once an objective force of reason, and a hopeful insight into subjective lives. Shternberg's later rethin-

king of Gilyak kinship reminds us that the elegance of kinship constructions can sometimes be misleading. As Greg Urban has noted, “Kinship terms seems to us to be closely related to one another – pieces of a jigsaw puzzle – because we, in fact, treat them that way in our discourse practices” (Urban, 1996: 104). Hence, when Lévi-Strauss wrote, “A human group need only proclaim the law of the marriage of the mother’s brother’s daughter for a vast cycle of reciprocity between all generations and lineages to be organized, as harmonious and ineluctable as any physical or biological law” (Bataille, 1993: 47), harmony may have also been in the eye of the beholder. Gilyak marriage rules were evidently not only difficult for Gilyaks themselves to follow, Gilyaks never seem to have followed them as religiously as Shternberg avowed.

In the decades of Sovietization that followed Shternberg’s first drafts of *Social Organization*, the kinds of local knowledge and social circumstances that made Gilyak marriage rules possible have long since been transformed (Grant, 1995a and 1995b). As Galina Lok blurted out when we both sat sequestered in the confines of a North Sakhalin oil town in 1995, reading the entire manuscript aloud to each other for review, “You would have to have a head bigger than an entire House of Soviets to understand this!” And yet for all the passage of practice, to some Nivkhi even the most complicated of marriage rules have not lost, in Shternberg’s words from the *Social Organization* text, their “mnemonic-adjudicating force.” To historians of anthropology, Shternberg’s work invites us to reflect on one people’s experience of being represented through a language of kinship that became the discipline’s flagship idiom in the 20th century. To Gilyaks a century after Shternberg first came and went, he offers a portrait of lives once lived, and a study in how anthropological theory could change their world.

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