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TERRINI

*Ulcera pinna maculosa*

# The Amur Fishermen: Their Mythical History in the Oral and Written Dimensions

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## ABSTRACT

Before the 1930s, the peoples who inhabited the Amur region located in Eastern Russia transmitted traditional information only orally within their groups. That accumulated knowledge was a fundamental cornerstone for their mental world and mainly reflected the social processes that had been unfolding in the large river valley. The *Three Suns* Nanai cosmogony legend, which tells the story of the three suns that melted and scorched the Earth, is a good example for understanding the local history. The basic myth is split into several actions, forming independent subplots with separate characters and their behaviors. The branched storyline of the legend confirms the specific migratory processes that used to take place within the Amur territory. The new communities embedded their family stories into the *Three Suns* common myth. In that way, the migrators harmonized their lives with their world model, i.e., with the mythical universe seen as the otherworld where shamans sent only righteous human souls.

Since the 1930s, with the spread of written language, the Amur natives have developed a new culture code which was created not by the older generation who still followed the oral tradition, but by the literate persons among them. Their entire folklore heritage was given a different conceptual design and began to be understood within world history. The local archaeological artefacts dating back to the third millennium BC were interpreted through the mythic narrative. Thanks to this discovery, a Russian-language simplified version of the legend was created which was accessible to a wide audience.

Nowadays we witness the emergence of a new mythical history originating from this written version. Linking the legend to the archaeological sites makes the Lower Amur peoples' history significantly older. According to modern understanding, the local history begins not with mythical events, but with a reconstructed picture of ancient social life embedded in the Earth's topography and chronology.

## KEYWORDS

The Amur peoples; fishermen; orality; literacy; history.



## Introduction

The narratives of most ethnic minorities occupy a certain niche in the contemporary multilingual and multinational environment. Special attention should be paid to the oral heritage of hunter-fishers' communities as societies that have preserved their attachments to

particular places. Their legends were able to endure, indicating social dynamics. The historical and social background of Siberian territory reveals the existence of diverse cultures there. One of these melting pots was the eastern outskirts of Siberia where taiga nomads migrated. In the northern part of the Pacific coast, they assimilated to the local sedentary fishermen (Image 1). The cultural impact of Siberian foot hunters and reindeer herders extended to the Lower Amur River



Image 1: The territory of settlements of the Amur peoples (Nivkhs, Ulchis, Nanais).

district populated by native tribes of river fishermen. The results of archaeological and linguistic research in the Amur River valley threw some light on the colonization of that territory. According to data from several researchers, Siberian Tungus-speaking tribes might have come across the Amur Paleo-Asiatic (or Paleo-Siberian) natives in the second millennium BC (Okladnikov 1968: 25-42; Vasilevich 1969: 260; Shavkunov 1990: 29; Smolyak 1980: 260-66). Further, some researchers emphasized that in ancient times the Amur Valley's settlers also had close cultural relations with the population of the Southern Pacific coast. Elements of Austronesian culture (typical of Vietnam and Southern China regions) penetrated the Amur peoples' lifestyle and manifested in their pile buildings construction, tiger cult, and some mythic plots (Okladnikov 1971; Shanshina 2000). For a long time, the Amur territory was under Chinese and Manchu dominance which made a profound impact on

the lives of Amur locals. Since the nineteenth century, the Lower Amur River territory has been a part of Russia (Lin 1934: 1-27).

Considering those historical and social events, we can thus assume that the culture of Amur peoples evolved by integrating components from other geographical areas. Its composition consists of the primary (archaic) layer, which originated within the local fishing community, and external cultural forms and elements. The cross-cultural features have primarily shown in the Lower Amur oral heritage that combines myths belonging to Paleo-Asiatic and Tungus-Manchurian populations. Nivkh folklore, which has been preserved among the local residents of the Amur Estuary part, is particularly useful for researchers. Nivkh narratives have absorbed much of the mythical heritage of the Amur archaic communities. The Tungus-speaking peoples (such as Nanais and Ulchis), which reside in the proximity of the Nivkh, have inherited the oral folk arts of Siberian migrators and Asian agrarians. In spite of the fact that the Estuary and "upriver" populations distinguish themselves by their ancestral lineages and languages, both societies were built on fishing traditions and used non-literate forms of communication for a long time.

Oral heritage of the Amur peoples remains poorly studied mainly because part of the archaic forms of local cultural heritage were lost during the Soviet era with its atheistic ideology. Some surviving folklore texts have been subjected to literary processing. Nowadays we can discuss the local narratives using accounts by indigenous writers and folklorists. We are basically dealing with scattered stories brought together and arranged in a certain order, according to literary plots. Missing links in the local oral heritage generate debates in academia about whether folk epics ever existed among the Amur natives.

One of the subjects of dispute is the Nivkh legend *Ykh-mif*, which was recorded by the

Nivkh writer Vladimir Sangi in 1974. A book version of that legend, with a detailed plot, has reached us. The question remains open whether Sangi's masterpiece combines distinct stories or contains one general legend (Sangi 1981: 416-34; Khazankovich 2007). *Three Suns*, another legend (myth), is no less interesting. Spread over a wide geographical area, it was noted among the Sakhalin and Amur Nivkhs, Amur Nanais, and Ulchis. The Russian ethnographer Petr Shimkevich first published the legend in his paper on Nanai shamanism (1896). Next, the American anthropologist Berthold Laufer recorded the mythical story during his Amur expeditions in 1898 and 1899 (1899, 1900). We can also find evidence of it in Lopatin's (1922), Sternberg's (1933), and Smoliak's (1976, 1991) works. Their transcribed stories differ in details, possibly indicating that the legend might have been recorded from various storytellers. We can assume that different variants of the *Three Suns* legend coexisted within the Amur area. Shternberg assumed that some events of the legend plot could have originated in agricultural communities of Southeast Asia. It is of both historical and cognitive interest to trace how agrarian cultural elements entered and transformed fisher communities. The authenticity of the Amur narratives can hardly be ascertained after such a long time. However, detailed textual analysis of these local mythical stories can help us reconstruct the oral dimension of the taiga and Pacific fishermen who only recently acquired a written history.



### The Amur Fisherfolk: Contents of Their Oral Traditions

The literary versions of the two myths—*Ykh-mif* and *Three Suns*—allow us to recreate the mental world of the Amur fishermen. Their plots and contexts correspond to

stories preserved in the folk oral memory and reproducible over many generations. These storylines include events that occurred in mythical times and relating to the origins of human beings. The Nivkh legend *Ykh-mif* consists of a cycle of stories where the main character *Ykh-nivng* fights evil entities, travels through the heavenly worlds, and frees people of malevolent spirits. The legend of *Three Suns* tells us about the times when the three suns in the sky made the Earth sizzling hot, and one man (or spirit) killed two of the suns. Despite the fact that the stories involve supernatural events, they reflect the earthly plane at a basic level. This aspect is manifest in all hunter-gatherer communities. We can actually define their oral creativity as environmental and bound to certain places. Many mythical stories record the details of the land which are important for fishermen and hunters. The extraordinary events in these narratives happen on the seashore or riverbank, or in the wooded area, which are presented as a backdrop.

The *Three Suns* myth (legend) is of particular interest for understanding how living space was organized. The echoes of this legend can be discovered in the Nanai toponymy. There are some places connected to the mythic events. The first site revered by Amur fishermen is located on the Emoron canal. It consists of two stones personifying an old man *Mapa* and an old woman *Mama*. Passing fishermen would usually ask them for good luck fishing and a fair wind (Bel'dy 2000: 81). The second one, a stone personifying an old woman, *Mama hureny*, is located near the Nanai settlement Sikachi-Alian (Bel'dy 2000: 84). The boulders covered in petroglyphs, which have been found on the riverbank near Sikachi-Alian, tell a cosmogony story too. Similar main characters are mentioned in these toponymic legends, namely *Mama*, *Mama hureny*, or *Delo mama*. The same character is found in the *Three Suns* myth. The versions recorded by Laufer and Sternberg read: "The water





Image 2: The woman shows off her wedding outfit with the embroidered ancestral tree and bird *Kori* (the images are placed on both sides of the back of the robe and enclosed in scaly ornaments). Photo by A. Maltsev, 2011.



Gorin river (the tributary of the Amur River which the Devyatka flows into) and died there. People gathered at that place, they decided to cook the bird and divide its meat among themselves. The Daxsur (Zaksor) family got the back of the bird's knee; the Byldy, the upper part of its knee; the Tumali, its chest; the Oninka, its back, and the Xyzyr (Khodger), its abdomen (Sternberg 1933: 503).

This fragment illustrates how the mythic events resonated with the Nanai families' life, allowing us to look at the mythical history from a different angle. The bonding between mortal beings and their cosmic ancestors comes to the fore in it. Returning to the general myth about the three suns, we should focus on its main characters who allegedly launched ancestral bloodlines of the Nanai peoples. The Zaksor, Khodzer, Kile, and Oninka Nanai families considered the mythic figures *Khado* and *Miameldi* to be their families' ancestors (Smoliak, 1976: 133-4, Sternberg 1933: 493-5). Besides, each of them claimed ownership of the legendary past. This emphasis on kinship with the celestial entities was clearly expressed in the diversity of storylines and heroes of the cosmogony myth. Each of the Nanai clans had its own version of the legendary plot where *Khado* and *Miameldi*

had different statuses. We find such various statuses of the main characters in the early folklore material collected in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. In Laufer's version, *Khado* killed two suns, and his daughter *Mameldgi* became the creator of the Underworld (*Buni*) (Laufer 1899: 749-50). According to Shimkevich's version, *Dolchu-Khoday* unnecessarily shot two suns and two moons. He became a mortal person and the first shaman (Shimkevich 1896: 9-10). On the contrary, Sternberg highlighted that *Khado* was only the Polar Star, and two suns were shot by *Miameldgi* or *Guaranta* (Sternberg 1933: 492-5). These inconsistencies in storylines can be explained not only by the personal interpretations of the cosmogony myth that researchers have encountered. It can be assumed these versions were inherited in the storytellers' families. Such variable details also indicate the heterogeneity of the Nanai society. New settler groups embedded their family stories into the common cosmogony myth thus branching and detailing it. These various components of the oral story are built into the narrative skeleton, which reproduces the construction of the universe. The *Three Suns* myth has been modified over time. Here are the key moments of the story:



(1) *At the bottom of the tree of life, a man was sitting with his back firmly stuck to the tree trunk. Guaranta separated him from the tree trunk, and then he gathered the tree leaves and fruit in his caftan and went home together with the rescued man.*

(2) *At home, once Guaranta undid his caftan, the leaves and fruit flew up and began vanishing through a hole in the house wall. In order to retain them, Guaranta decided to plug that hole with his caftan. He attached some leaves and fruit to his clothes to obtain divine power.*

(3) *The newcomer became Guaranta's son-in-law by marrying his daughter, Durulda. They had a son who grew up, then got sick and died. The soul of the deceased son suffered because it could not get to the next world. Durulda tried to help her son. She went up the road of the dead and got to the gate, which was blocked by her father's caftan. Durulda freed the gate removing that caftan from it. Since then, people don't stay on earth when they die, mortal souls pass through that gate to the underworld (*Buni*).*



These plots mention iconic figures of the Nanai's mental world, which include archetypes that are typical of most traditional cultures. Folk models of the world consist of trees of life; men guarding portals to the underworld; heroes who become ancestors of human beings. These anchors of many folklore plots reveal the mnemonic and ceremonial significance of the oral text (Eliade 1959b; Levi-Strauss 1955; Lotman 1990: 34-72, 103, 225-56). The Nanai shamans used the mythic story in their shamanic chant called *diaringha nimga* to see off souls to the afterlife. The shaman associated himself with the main hero *Hado* (or *Durulda*) who, according to the story, received a gift in the form of leaves and fruit. The decoration on the shamanic outfit was a reference to the mythic time. Metallic mirrors (*toil*) attached to the shamanic outfit and a pommel (*tondor*) for his headdress symbolized the mythic leaves and fruit. The shaman used the chant like a tool for controlling spirits and navigating among them, chanting and sound design playing an important part in it. In reenacting the mythic cosmos, he resorted to non-verbal techniques, using visual-tactile and acoustic images, pantomime, and onomatopoeia. This type of vocal and theatrical performance was reserved for birth and death ceremonies. The Nanai families would invite strong shamans when their relatives died.

We should emphasize the social and ethical roles of narrative in the Amur communities. For different families of Nanai, ancestral legends were necessary in order for them to harmonize their relatives' lives with a common space order. The legend was a standard by which the assessment of the human souls was made. The legendary created world was an ideal. It represented the construction of the underworld (*Buni*), to which the shaman as the main censor sent off only righteous souls. The souls of the drowned, of those killed by wild animals were not worthy of such seeing off. The locals and migrants thus asserted their positions

by inscribing their own stories into the common cosmogonic legend, and the shaman as the main ceremonial person oversaw that process.

This leads us to maintain that pre-literate heritage of the Amur peoples is multifunctional. Rooted in archaic times, their stories revolve around spatial landmarks, social organization, ethical and esthetical standards. The Amur narratives appealed to an invisible space consisting of the otherworld and a spiritual environment. The cornerstone of the oral storytelling was an arrangement of the earthly reality to reflect the order of the universe where an ancestral story had a more manifest nature. Consequently, the Amur communities tried to follow the "cosmic-ancestral" commandments under the supervision of the shamans as main keepers of the oral stories and censors monitoring human behavior.



### The Amur Fishermen's Oral Traditions: Socio-linguistic Aspect and Sacred Writing

Among the Amur fishermen, oral traditions were maintained through inter-generational communication. Despite the fact that members of the same clan could live in different parts of the Amur area, they represented a close-knit community in the ideological and ceremonial sphere. Unlike the Amur Nivkh people living compactly in the Amur Estuary, the Nanai and the Ulchi clans didn't occupy separate territories for living. They led a semi-sedentary lifestyle existing by salmon fishing. Studies have shown that settlements of the Amur fishermen were not long-term due to the depletion of some fishing areas next to which people settled (Smoliak 1975: 150-68). Adverse factors forced them to migrate to other places profitable for fishing. People could move out both with the entire ancestral clan and just part of it. In the new place, migrants



joined early settlers or their community incorporated other newcomers.

Among the Tungus-Manchu peoples living along the Amur River, the formation of clans was regulated by certain ethical standards that have been defined as the *dokha* institution (Maltseva 2019: 136-8; Smoliak 1975: 76-9). According to those rules, two local communities formed an alliance becoming a single exogamous clan, with a donor group adopting the name of a recipient group. In that way, large mixed clans appeared in the Amur Valley such as the Samar and Bel'dy Nanai clans. They grew over time adopting new territorial groups. Members of the kinship community had to fulfill certain responsibilities, for example, to provide mutual assistance in fishing, to observe exogamy rules, and jointly participate in religious ceremonies (Sem 1959: 14-7). This social phenomenon became the subject of debate among academic researchers. Some of them maintained that the *dokha* relationships were concluded between kinship groups of a single clan to prevent incest (Sem 1959: 17; Tugolukov 1972). Others held the point of view that there was no genetic connection between the adopted and adopting groups (Smoliak 1975: 130).

Beyond these debatable positions, the question of the continuity of oral traditions within Nanai communities remains open. The oral heritage of each consolidated clan could develop in two directions—smaller adopted groups added their family stories to the shared ancestral legend, or the groups maintained the shared one as was. In both cases, we should consider that any Nanai clan was a socio-religious organization whose cosmogony legend tied all members of the community together into a whole. In the Amur River valley, when a blood kinship community was fragmented, and its parts were scattered over a vast territory, the following could be seen: they acquired new ethnonyms in the new places. In connection with the fact that the Amur anglers kept a

semi-nomadic lifestyle, the question is how they managed to preserve the storylines of legends for a long time. The structure of a cosmogony legend includes a stable core and variable elements. The social context shows that each clan community consisted of indigenous members and accepted new members who could influence the legendary history.

Researchers of the late nineteenth century noted that the Amur peoples adhered to patriarchal customs and patrilineage. This type of society was typical for Siberian peoples leading the lifestyle of hunters and reindeer herders. It has been suggested that both Siberian (Tungus) components and patrilineal kinship could have appeared on the Amur territory after the seventeenth century (Khasanova 2007: 186-7; Shrenk 1899: 3-6). Matrilineality had existed in the Amur peoples' environment before that time (Tugolukov 1972: 111-2). The plots of the *Three Suns* myth about the rebirth of souls and the patroness of fish stock could point to the ancestor's possibly being female. Contemporary ethnographic evidence confirms the importance of women for the transmission of ancestral stories. For example, among Nanais living along the Gorin and Devyatka rivers, keepers of the cosmogony myth were Ekaterina Samar and her aunts Kseniia Digor and Maria Tumali, who was also a shaman woman. Also, among the Amur Nanai, women conducted shamanic ceremonies alongside men. However, women-shamans could not perform a funeral rite. Men were always chosen as strong shamans who sent mortal souls on their last path. Strong shamans would cater to the specific needs of the different Nanai groups. They could have the dead men's souls carried away in accordance with the Nanai clans' ideas—by deer, bear, or dog (Sem 1959: 14; Shimkevich 1896: 18).

Until the beginning of the twentieth century, a Nanai settlement represented a neighborhood community where settlers had different ancestors. They cooperated



during salmon fishing but kept their religious ceremonies separate, especially funeral rituals. The death of a member of the clan was reason for consolidating Nanai clan bonds. Members of the same clan got together and usually invited a shaman from another place; he was not always their kinsman. The main ceremonial person possessed not only the gift of entering the underworld, but also a large repertoire of ancestral legends helping him to choose a certain spiritual path.

The shamanic vocabulary needs to be paid special attention to. Some Nanai folklorists have faced difficulties in transcribing shamanic texts (Bulgakova 2016). Conventional language used in everyday communication was of no help in understanding the sacred world presented in the cosmogony myth. This suggests that languages of the Amur natives differed not only in origin, but also in functional use. Conversational languages of the Amur peoples (Nivkhs, Ulchis, and Nanais) reflect environmental specificities. For example, the Nanai language contains a large amount of words related to the water space and fishing activity. Some of these terms distinguish between different parts of the river system, such as, *da* (estuary), *ian* (main channel of a mountain river), *modan* (river bend), etc. (Onenko 1980: 130, 264, 542). Other groups of words express “locative relations”—approach the riverbank, walk along the beach, move away from the beach—and fish gender.

However, these natural concepts were poorly represented in local narratives related to the sacred sphere. In 1997 and 2001, the worship rites of the sacred places located along the river Devyatka were recorded. They were performed by members of the same family, who considered themselves part of the *Kevur* group of Nanais. The rites included sacrifices and the prayers contained cosmogony motives. This part of the prayers included archaic terms not found in the colloquial speech of the Nanais. Therefore, it was difficult for representatives

of the modern Nanai generation to translate it. The ceremony participants told that *Mande* (Manchu) languages used to be employed in ritual activity. If we accept this fact, it becomes clear that Tungus-Manchu peoples of the Amur region used Manchu language in both trade activity and the sacred sphere. The members of the *Kevur* group claimed that they had partly Manchu origin (Maltseva, fieldnotes 1997, 2001). With the development of trade relations with Manchuria, the Tungus-language populations of the Amur area brought back brides from there. The Amur territory could have been culturally influenced by Southeast Asia through such marriages. Some studies of the *Three Suns* myth did not reject cultural interaction between natives of the Amur River and their agrarian southern neighbors in ancient times. The myth contains an episode that is not typical of a fishing society. According to it, “the main character was raised in a stable. He grew up among pigs at first, then among horses” (Shan’shina 2000; Stenberg 1933: 492-3). This fragment mentions animals, such as pigs and horses, which the Amur peoples did not use widely in their economy. Nonetheless, the pigs imported from China could be used for sacrifices. The Nanai community had been maintaining trade and cultural contacts with the north-eastern districts of China for over three centuries before the twentieth century. The locals had the opportunity to be acquainted with Chinese hieroglyphic writing during that period of time. Research has shown that the imported written language also acquired a sacred connotation. Hieroglyphic inscriptions made on rice paper or rectangular pieces of red cloth were extensively used in shamanic rituals. The written words and phrases generally performed a magical (protective) function. They defended ceremonial participants against malicious spirits, and some of them included written prayers to the taiga, water, and celestial deities (Bo 1995; Smoliak 1991: 97-8). Under the influence of the Taoist



tradition that existed among the Chinese and Manchus, the Amur peoples' model of the world was upgraded. The alteration was primarily introduced to the tree representing the axis of the world. In the updated cosmos, the treetop pierced and connected the nine heavens overseen by the goddesses—patronesses of constellations, towns, and childbirth.

From the second half of the nineteenth century on, the lower part of the Amur region was incorporated in the Russian Empire. That historical event forced changes in the local peoples' lives. Russian missionaries tried to introduce the native population to Orthodoxy. They created a Russian-Nanai dictionary and some tutorial books for that purpose. Those editions mostly contained the catechism and Christian prayers translated from Church Slavonic into the Nanai and Nivkh languages (Protodiakonov 1884, 1889). It was the first experience of developing a written language using Cyrillic for the Amur non-literate peoples. However, the great majority of the local peoples remained illiterate. The missionary alphabet stopped being used in teaching in 1906.

The situation in this area changed dramatically after the beginning of the twentieth century. The Russian Empire with its Christian Orthodox tendency was replaced by the Soviet Union state and its atheistic ideology. The reforms of the Soviet government also concerned indigenous languages of Siberia. The Nanai, Nivkh and Ulchi communities faced such lingual reforms, which were focused mainly on creating written languages for ethnic minorities. Another reform was implemented to consolidate nomadic or semi-nomadic tribal communities into ethnic groups that allowed authorities to control them. In that way, the indigenous populations of the Lower Amur region were divided into several ethnic groups. According to the 1926 census, Ulchis (723 people), Nanais (5,309 people), and Nivkhs (4,076 people) constituted the main indigenous populations living along

the Amur (The All-Union Population Census of 1926). In the 1930s, a campaign was carried out to create written languages for these nationalities. The Nivkh alphabet was developed in 1931, the Nanai alphabet, in 1932. The Nanai language was also taught in Ulchi schools. At the beginning, alphabets were created on a Latin basis, and later (in 1937) they were converted into Cyrillic. The written languages, unlike the oral ones, were carefully structured. They had new lexical, grammatical and stylistic standards. This linguistic improvement revolutionized the Amur fishermen mentality.



### The Effect of Literacy on the Oral Heritage of the Amur Nanais

Interviews with the Nanais indicated that the introducing of the writing system had actually remade their community. The literate people began to appear after the establishment of the Nanai written study program based on the Naichino-Torgon dialect (Gorelikov 2009). This dialect of the Amur group of Nanais has become generally accepted in education and communication. However, the spreading of a standard language has revealed the dialectal heterogeneity of the Nanai society. Various dialects had been preserved along the tributaries of the Amur River for a long time before the 1970s. In these districts, the official language was not easy to understand for the older generation. There were differences in phonetics and meanings of many words. The local children also felt uncomfortable to learn writing at school. They faced difficulties pronouncing some words and phrases through a system of written letters. According to elderly informants, they had to think in one language and read in another one. During this period of language policy, the younger generation fell out of the family traditions. The family split was expressed



in the fact that elders could not always understand their children who used complex sentences and new words.

It should be noted that the vocabulary of the Amur fishermen has changed significantly since the 1930s. The atheistic basis of education has led to the fact that the sacred sphere has lost its meaningfulness in the life of Amur locals. Along with that, a whole set of words related to shamanic traditions, the afterlife and the spiritual world has been removed from communication. In return, the terms associated with historical events, physical space, technology, and industries have appeared. Introducing new standards of living caused creolization of the local languages. A simplified language has appeared, which fulfilled all the basic communicative needs of the local community (Sidbury 2007; Stewart 2016).

Because of the linguistic metamorphosis, the weakening of the connection between the old and young generations has become noticeable. Monitoring of that situation has demonstrated the natives stopped taking the ancestral memory for granted. Shamanism no longer made an impact on the life of the Amur peoples, and as a result of it they stopped prioritizing the spiritual world. The structure of the Nanai cosmogony legend also underwent changes having lost its branching because the ancestral stories had ceased to be of primary importance.

Since the 1930s, the ancestral stories of the Amur peoples have also existed within the literary and historical spheres, which contributed to a change in their storylines and transmission. During that period, indigenous people with post-secondary education became translators and narrators of ethnic knowledge. The following event also determined the future of the legend of the three suns. Okladnikov's archaeological discoveries made a huge impact on the content of this legend, which has been since interpreted within the archaeological past. He made a connection between the cosmogonic myth, the Sikachi-Alyan

petroglyphs, and ornamental patterns on ancient Amur pottery. In 1935, near the village of Voznesenovka, he found fragments of pottery decorated with stylized images resembling human faces or masks. According to his explanation, the fragments depicted the face of one of the mythical suns scorching the Earth. As for Sikachi-Alyan petroglyphs, Okladnikov used the local legend about the time when these boulders were in a molten state and one of the mythic characters painted figures with her finger on the soft rocks thus trying to perpetuate those events (Image 3). In fact, these archaeological discoveries associated with Okladnikov's name revolutionized the understanding of Nanai heritage. The Nanai reevaluated their collective spiritual experience. The Russian-language simplified and understandable version of the legend appeared then. It went beyond the local community thanks to its written textual form. Okladnikov's version of the legend is presented in his book *Faces of the Ancient Amur* and was included in the schoolbook used in Khabarovsk (Okladnikov 1968). It has thus become an element of documented history.



Image 3 : The Sikachi-Alyan petroglyph. Photo by A. Maltsev, 2008.

As they underwent social and cultural transformations, the natives changed their perception of themselves in the outside world. The notion of a vertical universe lost its impact on their lifestyle. The indigenous inhabitants of the Amur area no longer



conformed their lives to the shamanic principles. Their personal history unfolded not in a vertical projection, but in a horizontal one, and both personal and family lives were now deemed part of a linear history. We can see that history of ethnic groups also fitted into this outlook. On this timeline, some mythic events were connected to the life of specific communities. However, another picture emerges when scientific empirical knowledge competes with an irrational mystical experience. Numerous hypotheses and versions concerning the distant past create a gap that is filled by the transformed mythical heritage. According to modern native ideas, physical (official) history most likely determines trends in the mythical heritage and accordingly influences local history thus modifying it (Samar 2003).

According to the author's records, some locals interpret the legend as "ancient wisdom" in need of decoding, and a message to the future generation. They draw parallels with the folk material of other peoples (such as ancient Egyptians, Aztecs, Chuvash), where we can also find the same stories about three suns. This group of interpreters includes mainly representatives of the cultural elite (artists, writers). The legend also received a conceptual design in the form of the doctrine "about human races" who once inhabited the Earth (taken from Helena Blavatsky's theosophical philosophy), "the secret doctrine" of physical space, celestial bodies, and emergence of a human civilization.



### **The Amur Natives: Residual Orality through Private History**

How legendary heritage seeped through into historical reality is especially visible in modern personal life stories which, in their diversity, keep traces not only of family values but also of mental patterns and state

ideological forms. The elderly people with whom I conducted in-depth interviews often shared memories of their childhood and youth, and their parents' life stories. Some of them were educated people, and their family stories were highly detailed and attached to the historical background. They could rely on written records and draw parallels between their stages of life and historical facts. In that case, the informants used written language productively. They could find their bearings in the torrent of information to communicate, transmit and accumulate knowledge, and express their opinions.

However, the narrative of non-literate respondents needed specific analyzing. There were still people retaining residual orality among the Amur natives in the 1990s and early twenty-first century. Their speech activity should be considered as part of symbolic actions, which included, alongside sacred phrases, onomatopoeic and gestural acts to be expressed in rituals, iconic and mnemonic signs. According to their mental world, spiritual benevolent and malevolent creatures acted as invisible spectators and listeners at which all these means of self-expression should be primarily directed. Another specificity that the researcher encountered was the dualistic nature of the natives' lifeworld consisting of oppositions such as female-male, friend-foe, and permission-taboo.

Moreover, these binary oppositions, especially self-others, friend-foe, and permission-taboo, acquired new connotations in the context of the Soviet ideology that impacted the personal stories of the local illiterate population in a specific way. It was mainly displayed in the dividing of one's life into happy and unhappy periods. The bright period of their lives was linked to the Soviet society's successes and welfare. Accordingly, the personal narratives of that time included both socially approved narratives and deeply personal ones. The official part of the life history emphasized heroic, aesthetic and moral aspects of life, as

well as labor and creative growth, while the more personal part evoked the ancestors' past and traditional beliefs, and didn't always correspond to the official rhetoric. The plots could reflect the daily routine but also unreal events, which had allegedly occurred in an early fantastic "pre-Soviet" time. Those private narratives contrasting with commonly accepted ideas were sometimes exposed to rejection and even public censure. It resulted in some people concealing their family traditions. According to the surveys, the elderly interviewees hid their ancestral customs and camouflaged by correcting their own family stories to avoid censorship. Small groups outside the villages had been holding shamanic ceremonies and worshipping cults without making any public appearances throughout the Soviet era.

In the 1990s, conducting in-depth interviews with the Amur elderly people was still difficult because of this secrecy. The technical aspect of communication should also be noted. The respondents had to make sure that interviewers could be trusted and provided information about their personal lives in a fragmented and incoherent way in some cases. I have thus found that most natives followed certain rules in narrating their lives. Their family stories contained no details about their ancestors' daily lives—there was a taboo on pronouncing the parents' names and their biographical details. These gaps in the family histories were filled with unreal events having mythical content. It was a challenge to have them disclose this layer of the family narratives in routine communication. Watching the respondents' behavior in the circle of their neighbors, relatives, families and outsiders was subject to research. In two interviews that were recorded in the 1990s and early 2000s, informants used some means of ritual interaction.

During the meeting held in the Ulchi village of Bulava in 1992, the responder Mikhail Duvan, a hereditary *tudin* (a shaman's assistant), took some time to share



Image 4 : Mikhail Duvan (1903 (1911) – 1996)–Ulch *tudin* and narrator. Photo by G. Bulgakov, 1992.

his life story with us (Photo 4). After a lot of cajoling, Mikhail Duvan finally told about his life trajectory under the pretext that he was going to die soon, and so he would not be sorry to share his individual story. His narration was deeply modulated, similar to a vocal performance, and lasted for about fifteen minutes (Maltseva, fieldnotes 1992). Our first visit there took place in 1991, and at that time the informant had not yet felt an urge to tell his life story.

The second interview recorded among the Gorin Nanais in 2001 was also a kind of "message before dying." In that case, the author tried to obtain the information by participating in a worship ritual. The elderly Kseniia Digor decided to remember the course of her life during a final boat trip (Image 5 and 6). The ceremonial route passed



Figure 5 and 6: Kseniia Digor, main informat during the research. Screenshots from a video, made by O. Maltseva

by several legendary spots located along the river Devyatka and ended on the river island Naan where Kseniia Digor had come from. She recalled her own life milestones in venerating the legendary places as vital to her (Maltseva, fieldnotes 2001).

Notably, these symbolic actions regarding private life observed some older communicative principles. They were typical of the transmission of accumulated life experience within the ancestral communities that consisted of blood relatives and adopted persons belonging to different families. It was reflected in how they constructed interaction between natives and outsiders. As far as Mikhail Duvan and Kseniia Digor were concerned, they preferred to be interviewed by involving their nieces,

Nadezhda Duvan and Ekaterina Samar, who acted as interpreters for them. In that type of communication, the researcher was given the role of stranger (or outsider). I had to go through a sort of initiation ceremony to become closer to the family groups. The researcher managed to gain their trust using long-term communication and participating in their family events. While communicating they also demonstrated their commitment to some archaic ideas implying that the sacred world is embedded into the physical space. Mikhail Duvan and Kseniia Digor reconstructed that mental model using symbolic acts and chanted speech in their storytelling.

Here is the basic plot of Duvan's story-song titled *Hanina Can* [Happy/holy place]:



*I was working hard on the ground driving a tractor/ While working, I had a heart attack and was hospitalized/ My soul left my body and ended up in the heavenly world/ That world sparkled and shimmered with unusual colors/ [part of his song was a description of the celestial world] I saw my heavenly bride there/ [according to the Amur shamanic traditions, every shaman (tudin) has a heavenly bride] Then I recovered and descended from heaven to earth/ I again found myself on this gray ground, and I had to dig into it and turn over stones again.*



This life story shows how oral traditions had been transformed in the context of historical events, linking the shamanic narrative and a subjective comprehension of reality. Mikhail conveyed his personal experiences in that vocal performance

that used a modern tune. The melody of his story-song could be often heard during performances of amateur art groups.

Kseniia Digor introduced her lifeworld in a ritual form. In worshipping the sacred sites, which personified *a horse and foals, a dog and*

*puppies, a heavenly bride*, she was addressing her ancestors.

These views of the world that shared the idea of a vertical universe were used as the skeleton for constructing the story of their individual life. Both Mikhail Duvan and Kseniia Digor saw the end point of their lives in the reenactment of the cosmic order. Mikhail expressed it in his description of the heavenly world. Kseniia's goal to visit Naan (her birthplace) was also related to the design of the universe. According to her family's ideas, that place was linked to the invisible cosmic pillar which the ancestral dead souls used to climb to reach the Polar Star.

When working with such sources of the information, one encounters some cognitive and linguistic problems in decoding the information. Our survey showed that there could be some language gaps between the generations of the same family, and conventional language norms could not always be used to interpret these narratives combining modern and archaic elements. There were some difficulties in the accounts of Mikhail's and Kseniia's worldviews by their nieces. The nieces found it difficult to translate the obsolete words of Manchu, Ainu or Nivkh origin. This means that each Amur clan used to have a specific linguistic structure resulting from inter-ethnic marriages. To avoid being fully assimilated, these multicultural families became autonomous over time and worked out their own standards for communicating with each other. For example, Kseniia Digor, who belonged to the group of *Kondon* Samars, inherited the Manchu traditions that were expressed in her lifeworld along the female line. The mythic story associated with the local toponymical legends was inseparably bound to her family group. Another local group, the *Iamikhtha* Samars with Tungus (Siberian) roots, hadn't had an opportunity to be involved in that mythical and ritual complex until today. From the interviews with Mikhail Duvan, it became apparent

how selective he was in choosing his social circle. During our last visit to Bulava village, Mikhail Duvan preferred to use his relative as an interpreter, and not any outsider because he expected that a person belonging to a different family would not understand his language. However, he had to communicate with Svetlana Angin, a professional expert of the Ulchi language. The respondent was cautious and distrustful when interacting with a non-kin person.

The examples above show to what extent Amur natives' ancestral narratives differed from one another due to dialectal (linguistic) differences. Each family had its own legend.

Since Mikhail Duvan and Kseniia Digor passed away (they died in 1996 and at the end of 2001, respectively), their family stories have endured becoming general (public) legends. These transformed narratives entered the local history and festival practices becoming secular. We saw how the mythical part of Kseniia's family history was widely retold and used in festivities. Worshiping the objects on the Devyatka River has become part of the local festive events. Mikhail's life story has also been updated. Before he died, he had been to America and communicated with Native Canadians. However, his travelling outside the settlement received negative feedback from his neighbors. They considered his shamanic abilities were affected to the point of losing them, which meant his personal history had been devalued and had lost its sacred meaning.

The mythic content of family stories ceased to be relevant with the loss of family spiritual values. People preferred to focus instead on material conventional values, as shown by an interview recently recorded in the Nanai settlement of Sikachi-Alyan (Maltseva, fieldnotes 2011). I asked the old resident Evdokia Aktanko to share her memories. She was born in 1931, so her upbringing was not based on oral traditions, but she could have inherited behavioral patterns typical for pre-literate communities



from her parents. As it turned out, her narrative included textual information, from a Russian-language written version of the *Three Suns* Legend. She wouldn't let me read that text, she read it herself. That manner of communicating pointed to the preservation of some of the old traditions. In her mind, her own and her family histories began in mythic times. The fact that those distant events were preserved in the book was significant to her. The process of reading the book aloud was like a sacred act. That form of address is typical of an oral tradition, with the storyteller addressing the listeners. In this case, the chanted speech is key.

These examples illustrate residual orality as observed among the Amur native minorities recently. It was expressed in the purely private not public perception of one's own life. Similar life histories focused on mythic times and the vertical construction of the universe and at the same time reflected contemporary reality that echoed archaic concepts of the spiritual world. Studying the linguistic aspects of the biographical interviews helped us reveal the local cultural backgrounds that determined their contents. As noted, specific phrases and terms had been used specifically for describing the mythical universes. Each of the local kin communities had its own lexical set to express affection for its ancestral world. Those groups of words having a mnemonic function and providing information about the spiritual realm have been replaced with terms denoting physical objects since the dissemination of scientific knowledge among the natives. Currently, the Nanai language is undergoing processes of acquiring complex morphology and creolization at the same time, inspiring the locals to preserve their narrative heritage in a different way. We can see how written Russian and written Nanai have been promoting a new cultural code, entering the Nanais' family values and influencing their personal stories. Proceeding from there, the Amur family

and individual narratives, as well as the local social history, are being updated with simplified Russian or literary Nanai texts.



## Conclusion

The narrative legacy of the peoples living along the Amur River has taken shape within certain historical and environmental contexts that defined the specificity of its form and content. The traditional Nivkh, Ulchi and Nanai salmon fishing communities preserved their own oral histories within kinship groups. Their "primary orality" lasted for a long time before the twentieth century, being passed on for many generations. The continuity of the oral traditions of natives was based on maintaining their family stories where ancestors played prominent roles. Some of the families' tales entered the general cosmogonic legend whose foundation was created from the plexus of local and early imported beliefs. Analyzing the *Three Suns* Nanai myth (legend) has shown that its primary layer was related to a patroness of the water element. Having been in the making for a long time, the storyline of the legend had absorbed some plots from South Asian narratives. The branched legend storyline also reflects cultural processes that took place in the Amur River area and indicates that the groups of migrants embedded their own family stories in the structure of the local legend. In doing so, they appealed to the cosmic order and emphasized their importance in the lay of a new land. The legendary content had deeply symbolic significance for the natives and new settlers. The concepts of the spiritual world are reenacted through the attachment to particular places, in rituals, and ornamentation. The mythical history of the Nanai presented in the *Three Suns* myth, especially as replicated in funeral rites, held the key idea of recreating the



mythical universe, with its upper and lower heavens, and a vertical axis running through them, connecting the past and the future. The connotation of the vertical universe is couched in mythological imagery—the tree of life, multilevel worlds, and the sacred itineraries of mythical heroes. Shamanic traditions made a huge impact on the legend and transformed it. Now the main character not only embodied an ancestor but was also associated with a shaman. As the main ceremonial performer, the shaman oversaw the afterlife ceremony and tracked the movements of human souls in the spiritual world.

Since the 1930s, the mythical history of the Amur fishermen moved on to the next stage of its development. From then on, generational memory and shamanic ideas stopped being meaningful as the transfer of knowledge in writing gained prominence. Educated people, who replaced shamanic figures, determined the criteria for maintaining the oral heritage. Consequently,

they introduced a materialistic worldview to the local peoples. The indigenous ancestral stories were put into book format and significantly simplified. The locals' world model was also transformed, from a vertical to a horizontal ordering of the world, meaning that historical events were used to upgrade the mythical stories. The mythic past was linked to a linear history and interpreted to understand the mental world of ancient people. In this context, the attachment of mythical history to the earthly plane became the most relevant in turning memorable legendary places into tourist attractions. Events of the scientific (linear) history were also reflected in life stories, gradually displacing the mythical reality from the natives' mental world. Nowadays, we can observe residual orality within the context of life history. It is expressed in the reproducing of some archaic ideas and ritual forms of communication. Its specificity is characterized by its coexistence with ideological principles and literacy.



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