

## 8. The Death Ritual of the Koryaks

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## **8. The Death Ritual of the Koryaks**

### **8.1 Reunited with Alekseev and Natalia**

It was in May 1995, a year and a half after my first expedition, that I visited Srednie-Pakhachi village again. Prior to this second expedition, I tried to contact the three Russian researchers who were apparently in Sankt-Peterburg. After numerous attempts at making international calls over a few weeks, I finally managed to get in touch with Sergei, the hunter. He said that Mikhail had left town to work and Vasha seemed to have returned to his hometown, in the Ukraine. Sergei himself said he was thinking of leaving Russia and going to the United States because life was unstable. The deteriorating Russian economy had obliged the researchers to make major changes in their lives.

Given the situation, I decided to ask Bazarov – a linguist working at a university in Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskii, the state capitol of Kamchatka Oblast – to guide me this time. The year before, in 1994, he had given a small lecture about the Koryak language at Hokkaido University, where I work, and we had had a conversation over a meal. He had promised me then that he would help me out in my investigations concerning Kamchatka if I needed any help. He had moved to Kamchatka from mainland Russia with his mother when he was four years old. Four years prior to that, or 35 years ago, his father had been assigned to Kamchatka as a university professor. Bazarov said he considered himself a native to Kamchatka even though he was not born there. He behaved like a gentleman, always dressed in a business suit with a tie whether he was in Japan or Kamchatka.

Although I left Japan at the end of April, it was already May when I headed northward from Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskii with Bazarov. The Kamchatka Peninsula was still covered with snow and inland along the central range volcanoes were smoking. Clusters of drift ice and the blue ocean surface appearing between them could be seen around the Komandorskiye Island, which floats at the border of the North Pacific Ocean and the Bering Sea. After the airplane had stopped at a couple of small towns on its way, we transferred to an even smaller plane at Korf and arrived at the mouth of Pakhachi River. I had gone up the Pakhachi River on Alekseev's boat the last time I was here, but this time the river was covered with ice and the tundra was white with snow. Therefore, this time we decided to catch a Mil – a Russian helicopter for transporting postal matters – to get to Srednie-Pakhachi. The white tundra land and the outline of the frozen river meandering beautifully spread below our eyes.

The helicopter landed at a square south of the village, where we unloaded our luggage. The Pakhachi River that flows in front of the village was covered with ice, on which people were fishing after making a hole in the ice. As we walked to the village, Bazarov who had spoken to a villager said, "There is something unusual

about the way people are acting. Something seems to have happened. I think someone has died.” When we got to Alekseev’s house, Natalia and Nina welcomed us. Apparently, Alekseev and his father, Vakhtangov, were preparing for the funeral. Edyk, who was Vakhtangov’s son and Alekseev’s younger brother, had died. He had been riding a trackless trolley when it broke through the ice and sank. Apparently, the other man who was riding the trolley with him managed to get out and survived, but Edyk had drowned. As a matter of fact, he was the one who had taken us back to Pakhachi on his boat when we left the village the last time we came. He was a slightly timid man and was not married, but Vakhtangov had left him some reindeer just in case he did get married. When the accident happened, Vakhtangov tried to rescue him on another trackless trolley, but that trolley with had more than ten men on it also ended up breaking the ice; however, they didn’t get into as much trouble because the trolley floated on the water.

Soon Alekseev came back and we were happy to see each other again. However, I couldn’t exactly be beaming when his brother had died and the funeral was to be held the next day. Moreover, I thought that his family wouldn’t want to take care of guests under the circumstances; I came to the decision that I couldn’t do anything else but to cancel the investigation and go home. When I asked Bazarov to tell them of my decision, they looked surprised and said that I could stay as long as I wanted. They told me I could watch the funeral take place. In addition, they told me that the *Kilway* – a festival held after the fawns’ birth – would be held after the funeral; the main reason I had come this time was to see this festival. I discussed the matter with Bazarov and decided to take up their kind offer.

As a matter of fact, considering the funeral, I had heard the last time I came here that they cremate the deceased. However, I hadn’t heard about it in detail, because we had always avoided sensitive topics. We knew that a French investigative team had come to Achavayam, a neighbouring village, to film the cremation and had been refused. What’s more, they had wanted to see the festival that welcomes back the reindeer in autumn, but the villagers put off the ceremony with various excuses until the French ran out of time and had to leave; the villagers held festival the day after the French had left. Since their funerals and ceremonies are directly related to their spiritual world, they prefer not to show them to outsiders. So when Alekseev and his family told me I could watch their funeral, it made it all the more a good opportunity for me to learn about “their world.” In my last trip, I felt I had finally found the entrance to their spiritual world, but in this expedition, I was about to learn a little bit more about their spiritual world through the various festivals. During my previous visit they had come to learn that I wasn’t a bad person, and in this second trip we became friends. I decided to accept the villagers’ kindness, though they should be filled with grief, and felt I wanted to leave their ceremony on record in a solemn and fitting manner.

Alekseev's wife, Natalia, remembered how the Russian researchers acted last time and said she didn't like Vasha and Mikhail. When we had left the village last time, we had separated at Tilichiki, from where I and Sergei had gone on to Petropavlovsk -Kamchatskii, and the rest of them stopped by at Palana, where the government office of the Koryak Autonomous Region is located. Then they returned to Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskii, where Vasha had lost all his money. He ended up borrowing some from Natalia's daughter's husband-to-be, Fyodor, which he still hadn't paid back. However, considering Sergei, Alekseev and Natalia both said they admired him as a good hunter and knew he was an attractive man. Sergei and I didn't know about what had happened because we had stayed at Fyodor's parents' house in Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskii for the night and had then left for Khabarovsk. To be honest, I was surprised to hear how Natalia felt about the three Russian researchers. Vasha, who had grieved over the Koryaks' present situation and had shown warm-hearted feelings toward them, was appreciated the least and on the other hand, Sergei, who acted less sentimental and more businesslike, was highly thought of. In fact from a Koryak point of view, Vasha seemed indecisive and couldn't even do his own duties, whereas Sergei, who accompanied them going hunting, could contribute to their subsistence activities specifically; his behaviour could be easily understood by anyone. The criterion by which the Koryaks judged people is quite specific and rational.

Since Fyodor's name came up, I asked Nina if she had already married him, but she told me they had split up. When I asked her why, she answered, "We didn't get along with each other." Fyodor had given her fashionable clothes and shoes as gifts; she had been with him quite a lot and had seemed fairly happy so I thought they were getting along well, but this had been the outcome of it. Although Fyodor was Russian, he followed the Koryak rules and worked hard before marriage in order to be accepted by Natalia's father, Alekseev. Wasn't that enough? Or could it be that Natalia's anti-Russian feelings had influenced them? As a matter of fact, when we stayed at Fyodor's parents' house on the way home from the last expedition, we were told something surprising.

At Fyodor's parents' house in Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskii, his mother was alone, welcoming us with a dull and depressed look. After she had led us to the room looking sullen, she locked herself in her room. At the time, we thought it was because her husband, or Fyodor's father, had died not long ago. However, from what we heard later on, there was another reason for her grief. Fyodor's wife had divorced him and had gone back to Ukraine in mainland Russia with their child. I must say I was surprised to hear that Fyodor had been married, but I could understand how depressed she must have felt, considering the fact that she was left alone there. Due to the Russian economic failure during those years, it had become difficult for people to live there in the land of Kamchatka. Hence, the Russians who originally came

from mainland Russia are returning to the mainland, one after another. As they were not an exceptional case, they also discussed about going back. However, Fyodor had refused to go back saying that there was no way that someone like him, who had been born in Kamchatka and had many friends there, could live over there now. That was why his wife had gone with their child back to Ukraine where her parents lived. As a result, Fyodor and his mother were left here.

It seems like the real reason why Fyodor refused to go back to the mainland was Alekseev's daughter, Nina. Fyodor was working as a driver in Pakhachi, but after his father died he moved to Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskii, since they had to do something about their house there. However, even after he had moved to Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskii, he often visited his friends in Pakhachi, and stayed at Alekseev's house in Srednie-Pakhachi Village. He went hunting and fishing with Alekseev, Nina's father, and fixed engines with him too; he worked for Nina's family. He certainly could marry Nina after he had divorced, but looking at it from the Koryak side – as Vakhtangov had once told me – the criterion of approving their marriage would be whether his daughter's life would be a happy one, and whether he had the capacity to make it that way. If Fyodor had married Nina, unless his mother moved to Pakhachi or Srednie-Pakhachi, they would have had to live in Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskii where his mother lived. That was because Fyodor had to look after his mother, who was then on her own. But this fact would have made Nina's parents worry quite a lot; not only would they be far away from their daughter but also because they couldn't be sure how well Nina could adapt to living comfortably in Russian society, or a big city. If they divorced, and if Nina should come back to this village, it would mean this marriage was not meant to be in the first place.

After considering these situations over many years, Alekseev's conclusion must have been that "they didn't get along well" as Nina described. The Koryak tradition, in which marriage is not just an individual matter, but is also a family matter, is still alive here.

## 8.2 Cremation and Wrestling

The night we arrived at the village, we visited Vakhtangov's house to pay our condolences. The small old wooden house was the same one that we had visited several times to listen to Vakhtangov's story. The kitchen was on the left side, after entering the doorway, and the right side was a relatively spacious living room. The dead body was laid out on the floor of this living room. It was laid on top of reindeer fur, and another piece of reindeer fur covered it. About ten women were sitting around it. At the other end of the room, some 15 men were playing cards. We placed an open box of cigarettes on top of the reindeer fur in the region of the chest, as everyone else did. Vakhtangov's eldest daughter, who was the *sovkhos* chief, had come from Achaivayam, the neighbouring village. (As Vakhtangov had told me

before, she had moved to Achaivayam after marrying, so that she could live with her husband). On nights like these, people stay beside the deceased throughout the night without sleep, and they leave for the tundra early the next morning to cremate the dead body.

The next morning we woke up at five o'clock and went to Vakhtangov's house again with Slava, Alekseev's son. People were still there as they had been the night before. At six o'clock the men went out of the room, but we stayed behind inside the room with the women. Then the women started to twine a rope from grass. Maria, who had returned from the tundra, and another woman were tying this rope to their waists and their knees. It was good to see Maria again, but I just made a slight bow to her. They began to dress the dead body with burial clothes. They removed the cigarette box and playing cards from the reindeer fur on to the floor, and dressed the dead body that lay naked under the reindeer fur with reindeer-fur trousers and a hooded jacket by sticking their hands under the fur cover. The hood of the jacket was folded. Over the new burial clothes, they put a knife and a miniature lasso to catch reindeer, and a spear beside the body. Then the corpse is wrapped up in reindeer fur over the burial clothes, and is tied with a rope (Plate 18).

The women inside and the men outside all line up and each one of them circles around the body from the head, clockwise once. When they come to the foot of the body, they step over it, and facing away from the corpse, they kick the body's feet lightly. Then when they return to the head, they pick up a piece of cooked meat from a plate there and eat it. We also went through the farewell-to-the-body ritual as all the others did. The father, Vakhtangov, came close and spoke the last words to his son. Women cried. Then six to seven men lifted the body up, carried it over their shoulders and took it outside.

The body was put on a cart pulled by a tractor, and the women sat around it. While people were preparing outside to leave for the tundra, Vakhtangov brought a dog into the room. A woman inside the room brought along a plate with wood shavings in it, which she set on fire. Outside, people were already on the cart and trackless trolleys ready to leave for the tundra. I wondered what happened to the dog that had been taken into the room, but I decided to get on the trackless trolley quickly as well because they were about to leave.

According to what I heard from Alekseev later on, the dog was in the room for about 20 minutes. After they fed it its last meal, they took it outside and brought it to the point where the road led to the crematory. It was 20 minutes because that was about how long it took the people to get to the crematory. They then killed the dog at that point on the road. This meant the road was closed off there, and the dog would go to the upper world with its master. They stabbed the dog once in the heart with a knife. They didn't need to use a spear. They said the best way to kill it was to stab it straight in the heart without causing other wounds to it. Anybody could kill the

dog, but it had to be someone who could kill it skilfully without hurting it. After it is killed, the dog is placed with its head pointing toward the crematory on the tundra. The organs are buried in a hole in the ground. They put a dry piece of wood under its chin like a pillow. The wood could be of any kind, such as a white birch or a dwarf Siberian pine. Then the dog is cut open on its back from head to tail and is skinned. The flesh is cut apart as they take apart the breastbones one by one, which they then give to ravens. The dead dog is left there on the ground and people return to their homes.

The dog they choose to kill is the one that the deceased liked. It has to be the best dog. It should be a well-trained dog over two years old, and not a young one. Usually, a sleigh-dog or a hunting dog is chosen. Considering the reason they sacrifice dogs, Alekseev said, “When the deceased is cremated, the dead spirit flies between the earth and the sky. But the spirit can’t decide whether to go to the sky or to return to the ground. The dog’s spirit runs up to its master’s spirit and leads the way to the upper world.”

We went up a small hill, winding through the tundra on the trackless trolley. Bazarov looked uncomfortable – being a linguist, he might not have been so interested in these ceremonies. The man who happened to sit next to him was a big man with close-cropped hair, and a little drunk, and started to pick on him. Bazarov – who should have ignored him – objected to what he was saying. The big drunken man became excited and finally tried to grab at him. The people who were sitting there desperately restrained the big man, and somehow managed to calm him down and settle the argument. Although the Koryaks in this village live with Russians in their day-to-day lives, they don’t seem to have a positive feeling towards them. That feeling seems to emerge when they get drunk, as the case with Natalia had shown. It struck me as strange that the man had been very drunk and excited when we were supposed to be heading to a solemn ceremony. As a few *yananas* came into view on the tundra, we finally reached the place where they cremate the deceased.

The crematory is located at the end of a flat hilltop, which is surrounded by tundra covered with many dwarf Siberian pine trees (*Pinus pumila*). The sky was grey and cloudy, looking as if it would snow or sleet at any moment. The snow-covered tundra land speckled with dwarf Siberian pines spread in the distance. The men who had arrived earlier were already cutting off branches with green pine needles and were piling them up high. Some men brought crooked branches 20 centimetres wide and 3 meters long that made me wonder where they had found them. They must have been trees that had stood on the tundra for many years. The platform made of the piled-up pines was about two meters high, five meters long and three meters wide. They stuck some more branches with green leaves on them in the openings between the branches that were already piled up. A man stood beside the platform, scoring a dry branch with a knife – he worked branches layered with wood

shavings half-scraped off. These were shoved underneath the platform so that the fire would burn easily. There were about 60 people altogether. The women were sitting around the dead body on the cart pulled by a tractor. Natalia was gazing over at me looking as if she would burst into tears in any second.

Vakhtangov and another man got on top of the pine platform to see how it had turned out. A shallow dent, made in the middle of the platform so the body wouldn't fall, caused it look like a large bird's nest. At seven thirty, the men carried the dead body onto the platform. Maria and another woman climbed on top of the platform and untied the leather straps that secured the reindeer fur wrapping the body, and threw them below. The other man who was still on the platform mumbled something, which looked like he was sobbing in sorrow. Maria took him down to the ground as she put her arms around his shoulder, because he was just standing there looking like he was at a loss what to do. Then Maria grabbed the reindeer fur that was wrapped around the body and threw it below. The spear that had been brought there with the body was put beside the deceased. Two women sat beside the body.

Maria took out a large knife with a blade 30 centimetres long and tucked her right hand, which held it, under the jacket of the burial outfit. When she pointed the knife somewhere over the chest or stomach of the body, the other woman pushed hard over it, thrusting the knife into the corpse. As it struck, Maria drew the knife down to the bottom of the abdomen. The body was cut vertically from the chest to the abdomen. Then Maria cut the grass ropes that were wrapped around her waist and arms with the same knife, and put them down beside the body. Maria and the other woman, who were standing on the pine platform, were wearing dark brown smoked outfits made of reindeer fur, which they had probably made themselves. On this traditional clothing, white circles were embroidered with beads down the middle and the sides of the back. Short strands of beads hung from the circles, swaying slightly as they moved. The light grey sky that spread in the background, the platform made of deep green dwarf Siberian pines, Maria and the other woman in the dark brown outfits standing next to the dead body there, and the embroidered beads that shone like natural flowers and cosmic stars; these all made me feel not only the ceremony's solemnity but also the limitless beauty of it at the same time.

While they went on with the procedure, the men lit the fire under the platform. Thick smoke rose high, but Maria and the other woman sat still next to the deceased. Red flames started to flicker and the smoke surrounded the body and the two women completely as it rose higher (Plate 19). Soon after, Maria and the other woman slowly stepped down from the burning platform made of pinewood.

A man was shouting something. I looked over to see the large man who had picked on Bazarov in the trackless trolley. He had taken off his jacket and half-naked was shouting at people with his arms spread. Then two other men stripped to the waist and got into a scuffle. The two were trying to throw the other onto the snow

and hold him down. Another man went to challenge the giant of a man, but he was easily thrown onto the ground. Although he struggled hard on his stomach so that he wouldn't get both his shoulders pressed into the snow, the big man leaned over him, pressing the other man onto the snow with his stomach, throwing his fists high in the air as he raised a shout of victory. Vakhtangov walked over and cheered him vociferously as if to encourage the man to do more. The men and women who gathered around them were laughing loudly and cheering. The Koryak wrestling had started. (Plate 20)

Before the wrestling began, they had dug a small hole a little distant from the pine platform. It was a tough job digging it because the ground was frozen. After finally digging the hole, they buried the leftover bones from the reindeer meat that they had eaten the night before. Then they lit the pine platform and when people started to wrestle, Alekseev's wife Natalia and her son Slava started to make an *inawet* on the other side of the crematory platform from where they had buried the reindeer bones. This *inawet* is made by hanging four pieces of the backbone on a stick and an antler at the end of it. Under the stick on the ground, they place a chunk of fat. They also put three to four stones – just about the size one can hold in both hands – on top of the wooden stick. This is a symbolic reindeer that they offer to the dead. It is the same as the one we had seen two years earlier in autumn at the *Tantegining*, which is a ritual held in memory of the dead. In fact, the memorial ceremony is held once again in autumn, when the reindeer come back, for those who died during the summer when the reindeer herd is away. They are actually supposed to send the reindeer off together with the dead body at the crematory ceremony. Therefore, what I was seeing taking place in front of me – a ceremony in which the cremation of the deceased and the sending of a symbolic reindeer took place at the same time – was undoubtedly their perfect idea of a death ceremony.

The dead body, dressed in burial clothes with its head pointing eastward, was burned on the pinewood platform as it lay straight on its back. To the south of it, they buried reindeer bones in a small hole, and to the north they made a symbolic reindeer, which they sent to the upper world along with the deceased. People wrestled with each other one after another around the burning platform from which smoke rose high. Vakhtangov and another man poked the platform with a long pole so that it would burn well and threw in some more leafy branches of dwarf Siberian pine.

A high shriek was let out among the women. A small reindeer hide ball about 15 centimetres in diameter was thrown up in the air. People competed to grab it. The person who catches it throws it again to the next person. If this person keeps the ball and doesn't throw it, everybody tackles this person and presses this person down to the ground to shove snow down his or her back. Then they beat this person's head with the ball. Three young women were throwing the ball among them swiftly. When a man came close, they threw it to another person far from them so that he couldn't

catch it. The men and women compete with each other to get the ball.

Meanwhile, the wrestling was still continuing. A strong and firm but old man took off his jacket and stood on the snow with just his reindeer-hide trousers and shoes on. His broad muscular arms and sturdy chest told us how he had been chasing the reindeer on the tundra for the past few decades. His challenger was also a strong and mighty old man. They grabbed each other's arms and were seeing how the opponent would tackle them, just like the competitors in Olympic freestyle wrestling. They were gripping each other with their full strength and they didn't take their eyes off each other for a single second. If one of them reached out to try to grab the other's foot, the other one would spread his legs wide and keep his position low. They pushed and pulled at each other, waiting for a chance, and one of them would tackle the other and push him down onto the ground. However, a person is not defeated until both shoulders touch the ground at the same time. The man who had succeeded in pushing the other one down onto the ground sat on him and tried to turn him over on his back, but the man on the ground also struggled hard so that he couldn't be turned over. The man on top took the man underneath by the armpits and, all at once turning him over, pushed his shoulders against the ground. People standing around them cheered loudly. This old man was not only powerful, but was quite skilful. Then the big drunken man roared and challenged him. The old man gave him a wide berth at first, but at last they grabbed each other and began to push. When the old man pushed at him, the drunken man moved backward and they both collapsed among the women who were sitting around them. Then they stood up again and grappled with each other, watching each other's movements. The next moment, the old man made the drunken man lose his balance and pushed him down onto the snow. He turned the man, who was resisting, over on his back at once and made his shoulders touch the ground. The drunken man shook his head in disappointment, but soon admitted he had been defeated and took the old man's hand that had been held out to help him get up.

Then, two boys, who looked like primary school students, started to wrestle. They grappled with each other with their clothes on and fell down into the snow. An adult came and took their jackets off, and the two of them grabbed each other again. Grownups picked up the branches that stuck out of the snow so that they wouldn't get hurt when they fell over. The two quickly grabbed each other by the arms and one knocked the other over. Vakhtangov, who had been standing by the fire, walked over, took the defeated one's hand, then pulled him up and beat the snow off his back. Then he grabbed the winner's arm and raised it high to show everybody that he was the winner. This was how the Koryak wrestling went on. The big drunken man was walking about looking for new opponents one after another, as if to say he had come here only to wrestle. They attacked each other with all their might and threw each other over. The more serious they became, the funnier it got for the spectators;

they grew excited and laughed loudly.

While it was Vakhtangov who was cremating the dead body, Natalia and Slava were the ones who were making the symbolic reindeer to offer to the deceased, and the other relatives were sitting a little way off from everyone else, watching the wrestling and ball games quietly. As the solemn and sorrowful ceremony of cremation was taking place, high voices of laughter and cheering could be heard; we were in a mysterious atmosphere.

Slava went down the hill and was gathering branches of alder. Spring had just begun and the branches had not yet sprouted. He came back to Vakhtangov, who was standing by the fire, with an armful of withered-looking branches that he handed over to Vakhtangov. At eleven o'clock, the pine branches had almost completely burned, and smoke still rose from the high pile of ashes. Vakhtangov held the branches of alder in his left arm and put them down one by one with his right hand around this ash pile, as he walked around it clockwise. Then the people who had been playing or watching the competitions picked some of the withered grass around them and tied them together before they put it in their pockets – they started to pack up to go home. This meant the deceased would go to the upper world, but those who were present there would stay behind on earth.

It was eleven thirty when we returned to Vakhtangov's house from the tundra. In front of the door, a fire was burning in a dish and a thin strand of smoke rose from it. People washed their hands in the washbowl placed on a stand before they went into the room. There, lunch was ready, and we all ate. Reindeer meat soup, cabbage, carrots and potatoes, boiled Arctic chars, smoked salmon, macaroni, fried meat and desalted salmon slices – Nina had been cooking them the night before at Alekseev's house – were served. Bread and small bottles of vodka were served too. After the meal, tea and sugar, and pieces of biscuit-like bread were served as dessert. When people finished eating, some stayed behind chatting and the others went home.

The following day, I woke up at Alekseev's house. Alekseev woke up at six o'clock in the morning and said he was going to go back to the site of the cremation. Only the closest relatives were going to hold the last farewell ceremony. Alekseev got on a snowmobile and pulled a sleigh on which Maria and her husband were riding. Slava got on another snowmobile with Vakhtangov's wife on the sleigh behind it, and they all left for the tundra.

Alekseev later told me about this day's events as follows: as the spirit of the cremated body still remains, they surround the site of the cremation with branches of alder to prevent the spirit from leaving. He says it is like a house for the dead. In Koryak, it is called *melgun-win* or the "house of fire." When people go there, they say they can feel something inside that place, so they have to approach the house quietly. They leave the snowmobiles some distance from it, and the man walking at the front holds a lasso in his hand. When they get to the place where the cremation

was performed, he throws the lasso from about five meters away. The lasso catches the spirit of the dead person. After they have done this, they take away some of the branches of alder that surrounded the place from the west side. Then they enter the “house.” One or two of the closest family members sweep the burnt scattered bones to the centre of the circle with a branch of alder. The others sit at the entrance and wait until this is finished. When the bones are gathered, they prepare food and drink and lay a small cloth near the entrance. This is supposed to represent a dining table. The food is given out to all the people there, including the dead person.

At first, the food is given to the deceased, and people talk to him. They say the deceased can hear this. Then they all eat and drink. The meal is their ordinary daily meal – nothing special. Reindeer fat, dried salmon, meat, bread, water, alcohol, tobacco and tealeaves are prepared. The leftover food is thrown behind them. Some of them talk, others cry. One of the people sitting at the entrance takes the food for the dead and throws it out with the lasso. They cover the bones that have been burnt to ashes with branches of dwarf Siberian pine. Then they once again shut the house round with branches of alder. According to Alekseev, the strong power of the alder prevents the spirit from going outside.

If the bones are completely burnt it is a good sign. On the other hand, if a bone, such as the skull is left, it is a bad sign, meaning the deceased will come back to take with him or her somebody from the family to the country of the dead. They also have to put a spear, a bowl and a knife over the ashes. The symbolic reindeer that was sent off with the deceased is left there. Wild animals don't go near the ashes. They smell the odour of humans and avoid them. Therefore, they never bury the ashes underground or put stones over them. This does not contradict the Koryak worldview where the dead doesn't go underground but goes to the upper world. From what Alekseev told me, those who live at the Apuka River Mouth – they call themselves *weiyam* or “people of the river” – don't cremate the dead, but put stones over the dead body. They are Koryaks who hunt seals and go fishing. Although they live by the river, nowadays they breed reindeer as well.

The Koryak death ceremony, or funeral, gave me precious hints to understand their world and their way of thinking about life and death. Even though I had seen their funeral, there might have been parts that I didn't see. Moreover, as is the case with their “tradition,” there are probably some slight differences in the way they perform the funeral depending on the person. Or there might be some procedures that are originally supposed to be done in a different way, but are being done in a simplified version now, which is also something that always happens with traditions. In addition, I wanted to know how people would explain the meaning of the various events I saw take place at the funeral. Consequently, a week after the funeral, I asked Natalia to tell me about the death ritual from the beginning again – which she was very happy to do.

### 8.3 The Death Ritual as Told by Natalia

People have different areas of interest, and strengths and weaknesses. Natalia knew an awful lot about funerals. When I think back, she had already told me a few things about funerals the last time I had visited. For instance, she had actually demonstrated how they kick the dead body's feet with their heel after stepping over the body. Moreover, she knew quite a lot about their traditional reindeer fur clothing. So she took out summer clothes and winter clothes one after another from the storage room and explained to me what they were called. Hence, the customs for the funeral that she told me about were mainly based on tasks that only women knew about, such as the preparation of the burial clothes.

According to Natalia, the funeral is called *vialachet*. The word *vaalin* means "corpse." She said *achet* has no particular meaning. The verb "to die" is *kuvien*. The present perfect tense, "have died" would be *vien*. If a person dies outside, the dead body is brought inside the *yanana*. If a person dies of some illness at home, the pillars of the bedroom are taken away to make more room for guests. In a modern house, they move out all the furniture into another room so that all the guests can come into the bedroom. At the centre of the *yanana*, a fire is burnt. They lay reindeer fur at the back of the *yanana* where the bedroom was. In a modern house, they also place reindeer fur in the middle of the room. Then the dead body is placed on it and the body is covered with reindeer fur again, with the furry side up. Several pieces of fur are used to cover up the whole body. The head of the body is pointed to the central fire as they usually do when they go to bed. According to the basic way of thinking at the cremation, the head has to be pointed toward the east, from which the sun rises, but that is not necessary inside the *yanana*. Then from beneath the reindeer fur, the female family members – sometimes friends can be included as well – take off the dead body's clothes. They take off everything that the deceased was wearing, which they then give out to people. Actually, the elderly who can't make their own clothes, or people who don't have many clothes get to have the dead person's clothes first. The important thing when you take off the dead body's clothing is to make sure the naked body is not seen by anybody. That is why they need so many pieces of reindeer fur to cover it.

Then they straighten out the body. They even pull the hands and fingers straight so they will touch the back of the body. Then they put a wooden cross on top of the reindeer fur, more or less around the chest of the body. They also put a small black stone near this cross. This is called *vuukulgun*, which just means "stone." A small bowl or container, or even a kettle, is laid near the head – but it must be something beautiful. The bowl is used to pour out tea for the deceased. When the people drink tea, some of it is also given to the deceased. Those who visit there drink tea before anything. At the same time, they pour a little bit of tea into the bowl for the deceased. Then all the members of the family drink a little bit from this bowl. Drinking this tea

has a meaning. The family members who have drunk this tea are said to never get tired when they go out to the tundra in autumn to pick bilberries. After this, an old woman sits beside the deceased. This is the first day of the death ritual.

If the burial clothes for the dead person have already been completed, they are put beside the body. However, if this special clothing is not ready yet, the second day is spent sewing it. This outfit has no special name, and is called *kinitaaho*, which just means clothes in general. From what Natalia had told me before, housewives must prepare this burial outfit made of new reindeer fur gradually, in due course of their day-to-day lives. Actually, they mustn't complete the sewing before somebody dies, nor must they ever be seen sewing it by anybody else. In fact, once, when Natalia was showing us one of their traditional clothes – it was new and was going to be used as burial clothes – some guests came, so she quickly put them away in the storage room again. If the person who dies is very poor and doesn't have any new clothes, someone can volunteer to give him or her their clothes.

While the clothes are being prepared, a pair of gloves, a small bag and a scabbard for the spear are also made. The tasks are shared among several women; the first woman sews one glove, the second woman sews the second glove, the third woman sews the trousers and the fourth woman cuts up the reindeer fur. Then another woman sews the white dog-fur to attach to the hood of the jacket. This fur has to be taken from a male dog. If the family of the deceased doesn't have one, someone else provides it. The woman sitting beside the body makes thread out of dried tendon taken from a reindeer's spine. She splits the tendon up into thin strips and entwines them. As a matter of fact, the thread used to sew the burial clothes does not have a knot at the end. These strands of thread are put on top of the body. Then another woman uses this thread to sew the gloves. Because they use threads without knots when they sew the burial clothes, they mustn't pull the thread in the direction they're sewing. The stitches must not be fine, but long. In fact in their everyday lives, when someone sews poorly they say, "It looks like you've sewn for the dead."

Then the women make special bags out of smoked reindeer hide. There are two bags, one of which they put pine resin in, and this is tied to the belt. In the other bag, they put in things for sewing such as threads and remnants of reindeer hide. If the shoe-soles are made of sea-mammal skins such as seals, they take these off and replace them with smoked reindeer hide. In addition, if dog-fur is attached at the hem of the jacket just above the knees, they also remove this and replace it with reindeer fur or sea-mammal fur. At the back of the jacket, they attach a small tail-like strip made of reindeer fur called *ngoinnguen*. The women also make a special rope out of the skin of sea-mammals. Then they make knots on it and attach it to a spear. The number of knots on this rope is the number of earmarks they use on the reindeer. If the family uses three marks, then they make three knots. When they finish all the tasks, they stay beside the body all through the night to protect the dead person,

which means that someone has to stay awake all the time. Therefore, they play a game using sticks and stones. Children and dogs are not allowed in the room.

They must kill a reindeer for the deceased, which they do in a special manner. Usually, they kill the reindeer while it is still on its feet by stabbing it to the heart with a knife. However, when they do it at a death ritual, they lay the reindeer down on the ground and feel for the heart, then kill it by stabbing that point with a knife. They do this so that the reindeer's blood won't spill on the ground. In fact, this was the way we had seen them do at the reindeer ritual held in memory of the dead two years ago. The reindeer was killed without its blood dripping on the ground, because it would be sent to the deceased in the upper world. If the blood drips on the ground, it means the reindeer is offered to the land. Natalia added that if the reindeer cries when they are killing it, they cut a small piece of fur off the tail and put it inside its mouth. The reindeer head is boiled. The antlers and part of the skull are attached to the top of a branch of white birch, which symbolizes the spine. This was also the symbolic reindeer offered to the dead that we had seen on the tundra. Then they remove that part of the stomach, which is called *gyoyat*. This part is very greasy, and it symbolizes the reindeer itself. It is the same as the symbolic reindeer called *yoyat* that Maria told me about. The tongue called *jiljil*, the antlers are called *jinnagun*, and the first cervical vertebra called *kashihin*, are removed. The reindeer's large stomach is filled with blood. People prepare big bags made out of reindeer hide (although they use plastic bags nowadays), which they then fill with the blood-stuffed stomach and all the bones. Even the smallest piece of bone that falls out when they crack the skull must be added. The remaining parts of the reindeer are also put in here. Likewise this resembles what we had seen at the reindeer ritual held in memory for the deceased; organs such as the stomach that were cut out when the reindeer was dissected, and all the pieces of bones were gathered and buried deep in the ground. This is the end of the second day.

The third day of the death ritual consists of carrying the dead body and cremating it. Early in the morning, everybody eats breakfast. A dish full of finely cut-up boiled reindeer tongue is put near the body. They put out fresh tea for the dead too. The women weave the grass into ropes. People discuss who should do the task of sending the deceased off. The woman chosen to carry out this major job will wrap the rope around her waist and tie a small rope on her left arm, which is tied with a double-knot. The woman who will assist her also ties a rope on her right arm. They sit on both sides of the dead body and stuff moss into their mouths.

These women dress the dead body in its burial clothes. When they do this, they keep the reindeer fur covering the body as it is and dress the body under the reindeer fur so that the others can't see the body itself. One of them puts the trousers on and the other woman dresses the body with the jacket and puts the shoes made of reindeer hide on its feet. The strings on the clothes are always tied with

a double-knot. If the woman can't manage to put the gloves on the deceased, it is taken as an expression that the dead person feels reluctant to let her put them on. In that case, another woman is called out and she does the job instead. This is the end of the women's tasks. It is men's turn next.

The first job for the men is to tie up the reindeer fur-wrapped body with ropes. The dead person's father or brother does this. If the father is the one who died, the son does it. When this is finished, people circle around the dead body clockwise. They step over the feet of the body and kick the dead person's feet with their heels. Then they imitate the voice of a raven saying "kau, kau," and leave the house as they take a small piece of chopped up reindeer tongue from the plate near the body's head. Those who leave the house don't return. The men who stay behind carry the body over their shoulders and move it out of the house headfirst. Then it is carried to the crematory. In the old days when they didn't use trackless trolleys, they carried the body on a reindeer-sleigh. If the dead person didn't own any reindeer, people pulled the sleigh themselves and hauled the body. Natalia said that she would be carried on a reindeer-sleigh if she died. Even today, special sleighs for carrying the dead are prepared.

After all the men have gone to the site of the cremation with the deceased, some women stay behind in the house to prepare the food. They bring a dog into the kitchen and burn a small fire in the middle of the room. They don't burn it directly on the floor, but on an iron dish. One of the women brings a pair of alder branches, ties a little bit of grass on them and burns them slightly. Then she starts to purify the room. She touches all the corners, walls, floor and doors of the room with these branches of alder. If there is a sleigh in the room, she touches that as well. She touches everything in the room. Then these branches are taken outside and laid on the floor. If the house is a modern one made of planks, people wash the house with water. If reindeer fur carpets the bedroom floor, it is taken outside and cleaned. Then the bedroom is put back the way it was. In addition, the women heat the water and prepare for when the people return from the crematory.

When people arrive at the crematory, men gather pieces of wood and pile them up. First of all, they put down on the spot the special stomach of the reindeer – a symbol of the reindeer itself. It is then cut open and they put the bag containing the sewing kit and some thread next to it. Then the firewood is piled on top of it. This is how the funeral pyre is prepared. Then alder is placed over it, and the body is laid on top. The ropes that were tied around the body are cut and thrown down below the platform. People pick them up because they are believed to bring good luck. Then the men make two wooden hooks and give them to the women in charge of sending the deceased off. The deceased use these hooks in the upper world to catch salmon. In the real world, this fishing gear is made of iron, and the reindeer herders working on the tundra carry them with them. When they find salmon in the river, they catch it

by attaching the hook to the end of a wooden pole.

While the platform of firewood is being made, they dig a hole in the ground. The bag containing reindeer bones and the stomach filled with blood is buried in this hole, and is covered with branches of dwarf Siberian pine. Furthermore, they prepare a vertebra – the first cervical vertebra, which they pierce through with an alder branch – on the west side of the platform where the body is. Natalia said this wooden stick is alder, but I have heard before that it can also be white birch. The reindeer's trachea is also put here, as well as the bone marrow, which is called *kanmalan*. This is a tissue inside the thighbone of the reindeer's hind legs, the substance of which, from the knee to the upper end of the bone has to be in perfect shape – not a single part can be missed. As for the order in which they put these parts onto the ground, they start with the trachea and the bone marrow. On top of that they put the antlers and the spine threaded on the stick. Then these are covered with long branches of alder, which they weight with stones. These stones can't be chipped. Mind you, this symbolic reindeer is not an *inawet*. An *inawet*, which consists of the reindeer's antlers and the contents of its stomach, is an offering to the land, river or *Gichigi*. This symbolic reindeer made for the deceased is the very reindeer that is going to be sent off to the upper world with the dead person.

The woman who is assigned to send off the deceased unties one of the rope knots on her arm before she goes beside the dead body placed on the platform. Sitting down beside the body, in the same way, she unties each of the double-knots that tie the clothes together. She picks up a knife and sticks it under the reindeer-hide jacket. The assistant woman puts her hand down over the jacket. Then she cuts the dead body, takes out the knife again and puts it back in the scabbard. This woman looks at the face of the dead body to see if the eyes are open. If both eyes are closed, the family of the deceased will live long. But if one eye or both eyes are open, a family member or someone else shall die soon. The woman takes out the two wooden hooks and strings from her sleeve. The assistant woman unwraps the rope around the other woman's waist. Then they put these things on top of the dead body. After a while, men start lighting the fire underneath. The women wait for the smoke to come up and then leave the platform.

Ball games are played to keep people's attention away from the dead body. Pieces of moss and dried grass are put inside this ball. They compete between two groups – one group consists of men and the other of women. Women throw the ball to women, men throw the ball to men, and they scramble for the ball in a match against the opposite sex. Then the wrestling game starts. People smear charcoal on each other's faces. Men smear it on women's faces and women smear it on men's faces.

Meanwhile, men poke and move the firewood with long poles so that the fire burns well. Sometimes the dead body raises its right hand or left hand, though

Natalia says she doesn't know what that means. If some reindeer fur flies out, that means the dead person is rejecting this reindeer fur. This means that the fur cannot have been the fur of the dead person's reindeer.

When everything is finished, people leave the cremation site. People put branches of alder around the site. Everybody walks around this before leaving. In fact, Natalia says there are slight differences regarding this procedure between the Srednie-Pakhachi Village and Achaivayam Village, an east-neighbouring village on the Apuka River. In the Achaivayam Village, people walk in a zigzag and two women sit down and purify people with alder branches – they do this twice. They do this to close down the road so that the deceased will not return. However, here, in Srednie-Pakhachi Village, the women wait near the village. They purify people using the same alder branches they used to purify the house. After they have purified everybody, they throw the branches out. Before people leave the crematory, they bring home tied grass or *fai* – a general noun meaning grass – in their pockets. When they get home, they keep it in the same bag where the *Gichigi* is kept. When people come back to the *yanana*, they pour a little bit of water over their heads so it trickles down the back. In the modern wooden houses these days, they wash their hands. Then they begin to eat.

On the fourth day of the death ritual, three to four members of the family go to where they cremated the body. Then they collect the bones and cover them with alder branches, then they eat lunch there. Finally, they walk around the site once; they never get to see it again.

Natalia added the following story, as if she suddenly remembered about it. When the dead person is laid down in the house, the family members cry. At the same time however, they talk about the good old memories and funny things that took place when the person was alive. They laugh among them. For example, at Vakhtangov's son's funeral that took place this time, Natalia talked about how he once visited her house drunk and gestured to her putting up his thumb and little finger to give him vodka. This made everyone laugh.

In addition, Nina, Natalia's daughter, told us about the relation between human death and the weather. If people die happily the weather is fine, but if people die unwillingly, the wind is strong and the weather deteriorates. On the day Vakhtangov's son drowned, the wind was blowing strongly. She said he didn't want to die. When a man died a while ago, it was stormy. He didn't want to die either. Another time a woman was dying away, the wind was blowing strongly and it was stormy, but just before she died, the wind stopped and the weather became calm. She passed away happily.

#### 8.4 The Death Ritual as Told by Yuri

After the funeral of Vakhtangov's son, the festival called *Kilway* celebrating the birth of fawns had begun in the village. As I will describe in detail later on, we were invited to this festival held by Yuri – the “man who entraps people in ponds” whom I had met last time – and his family. At the festival, he told us a lot about their tradition and its meanings, or about its changes. He also told us about the funeral. He not only accurately knew about the traditions, but was also interested in what they meant. This was because he had received higher education when he was young, where he had learned to think in a scientific way. He tried to explain people's traditional worldview or beliefs in a scientific way. What interested me the most then was that he never tried to deny their traditional way of thinking. On the contrary, he tried to prove them scientifically. For him, the materialistic Russian science education – which is supposed to be based on the denial of divine or spiritual worship – had the surprising role of seeing Koryak beliefs objectively and affirming them.

He started to talk about the death ritual from the time when someone dies. What people do first is to let the family – wherever they may live – know about it. At this point they must clarify who will attend the funeral, and who won't. As the dead body can't be left as it is for a long time, one of the family members immediately starts to prepare the meat to serve to the guests, and all the preparation for the funeral begins. They have to prepare the burial clothes as well. Sometimes when they are short of something, the closest relative brings along whatever is missing.

If the deceased is a male reindeer-herder, and had participated in reindeer-sleigh races, he will be sent off to “the other world” with his reindeer sleigh – his sleigh, all the gear and his reindeer. If he was a runner, he will be sent to “the other world” with just a pole as high as his ears and nothing else. If a father had several sons, he would educate them so that one would become a fast runner, another a strong wrestler and another some other specialist. Whichever kind of specialist the deceased may be, all the men are sent off with a spear. Or if he were a skilful Bowman, he would take a bow and arrow with him. In this case, he has to take at least one arrow.

If the person who dies is an old woman, she has to be sent off with a reindeer. Young (unmarried) girls are sent off without anything. If an married woman dies, she has to take with her needles, a thimble and beads – i.e. her sewing kit.

Men have to take with them a knife and a small bell to tie around the reindeer's neck. It is to let the people in “the other world” know by the sound of the bell ringing that he has arrived at the “other side.” He also has to take a bowl and a spoon. The spoon has a dent in it, into which pine-resin is melted. The people on the “other side” are desperate to know how the families are living down on earth, and the deceased gets tired of answering these questions. Therefore, he can stick the spoon into his mouth and glue his lips with resin, and stop talking.

When someone dies in the village, they have to finish repairing the sleighs, sewing the clothes and any other handwork. If someone doesn't finish repairing, the deceased will come and ask him what he is doing. Then he will take with him this person to "the other side." All the people around the dead person have to be enjoying themselves. They may fight with each other, say jokes to each other, or criticize each other. They do this to show the dead person that they are enjoying themselves. When the deceased goes to the upper world, the people there will ask him what the people down on earth are doing. Then he can answer that he didn't bring them with him because the people down there were enjoying themselves so much.

Yuri says the funeral is just like a road. The deceased and the living walk together along the first half of this road. Then from there, the deceased goes alone. He also says that the deceased is just like a messenger. He says so because when the dead person goes to the upper world, the people up there ask him about the people down on earth and he answers them. The children are not allowed to participate in the funeral, although this rule has changed now. The reason why they couldn't take part was because they were afraid the children would get psychologically ill later in their lives from looking at dead bodies in their childhood.

The funeral itself is the procedure of sending the dead body off, says Yuri. This is done when the sun rises in the morning. This differs from season to season. In summer, the dawn only lasts for five minutes. Another way to know when the sun has risen is to listen to the dawn chorus. Using this method, especially in June, they say no one will miss it. People play card games all through the night using sticks and stones. It is prohibited to watch television or listen to the radio. According to Yuri, at the funeral of Vakhtangov's son, which I saw, the time people left for the crematory was a little later than usual. This was because they were searching for the trackless trolley that had sunk into the river. He said they would've departed earlier if that hadn't happened. Indeed, they had told me they were going to leave at four in the morning, but it was actually a little past six o'clock when they had left. Putting together Yuri's story, it seems like people stay beside the dead person all through the night and then leave for the crematory at sunrise.

Yuri said that he didn't need to explain the further procedures because it was just as I had seen. Therefore, I decided to ask him about several queries I had. First, I asked him why they wrapped the dead body with reindeer fur. He explained what kind of reindeer fur they wrapped it with. They put the dead body on a piece of reindeer fur, and then they cover it with another piece of fur. The fur underneath is placed with its furry side facing down, but the fur on top is placed so the furry side faces upward. He says this is to reduce the temperature of the body. They dress the body into its burial clothes underneath the fur so that other people will not see the naked body. I then asked him what the ropes put on top of the fur that covered

the body, were for. He explained that traditionally, the dead body was carried on a sleigh, so they tied the body to the sleigh with these ropes. In addition, I asked him why the women bound the rope. He told me that the woman and her assistant tied them onto their arms, as signs to show that they were assigned to send the deceased off. I also asked him the reason why they cut the dead body with a knife when they cremate it. Yuri said, just as an explanation, that they did so to prevent the stomach from bursting when the body was being burnt. Regarding the knotted grass that people take home from the crematory, he only repeated the fact that they take them home, and didn't add any explanation to it.

Then he started to talk again. Long ago, he said, everybody followed the traditions. However, nowadays they can't say they are following the traditions completely. Drinking alcohol at a funeral used to be strictly forbidden inside or outside the house. On the day following the cremation, the relatives who gathered at the house had to keep quiet. Although the body had been cremated, they thought the spirit of the deceased was still floating about around them. Yuri said he had once read an article about ghost visions in a science magazine. A ghost vision is when living humans see figures of the deceased. It said that they appeared after a person's death, lasting for about four to five months. Hence, he said that the spirit of the deceased was just a ghost vision created inside the living human's mind, and that it coincided with the scientific viewpoint. He went on to say, however, that the whole procedure has to be done so that the spirit of the deceased can go to the upper world without getting lost on its way. For example, when they cremate the body, they point the body's head to the northeast so that the sun won't blind the dead person's sight. Theoretically, of course, the country of the dead is located in the east, from where the sun rises, and Alekseev had told us that the dead body's head is pointed eastward. But as Yuri says, people pay close attention to minor things so that the deceased won't get lost on the way. It is as if the spirit of the dead really walks along the road to the upper world, avoiding the glittering sun's rays. Actually, Yuri believes that the dead spirit goes to the upper world as a matter of course.

Actually, taking Yuri's scientific interpretation further, people will take any measure for the dead spirit to get to the upper world, and by believing that those things are true, it could be said that they are discarding the ghost visions left in their brains. In other words, that means the death ritual itself is fictional. In that sense, their views of life and death, their traditions, or even their very culture might be based on fiction. Nonetheless, Yuri never denies his own tradition and regards it as something very precious. His daughter Ilyna, whose father thinks this way, is trying to devote all her energy into carrying on their tradition, which might be lost if nothing is done.

## 8.5 Rebirth into This World

I already knew about the belief that people from the country of the dead are eventually reborn to this world as babies. After the funeral, Alekseev and Natalia told me about this again.

When a baby is born after someone dies, it is thought of as a reincarnation of the deceased. (The person who died is reborn into this world again.) They call the baby by the name of the dead person and talk about his past life. They say, “Why have you turned so young? You, as a baby, are the successor of the deceased.” The sex of the reincarnated child can be different from that of the person who died. For example, Natalia’s son, Slava, is said to be the reincarnation of Natalia’s grandmother, while he is also said to be the reincarnation of Natalia’s father-in-law. Natalia’s eldest daughter, Nina, is the reincarnation of Natalia’s father’s mother, and her second daughter Katya is the reincarnation of Natalia’s mother’s brother. Alekseev is the reincarnation of Vakhtangov’s father, so when he goes to Vakhtangov’s house, Vakhtangov and his wife calls him *empichi*, which means “father.” In other words, the father is calling his own son “father” here. Katya got married and had a daughter, who is said to be the reincarnation of Katya’s husband’s father. The husband’s father’s name is Yetaolgin, but the reincarnated child has a girl’s name, Yetonyeuto.

This time, since Vakhtangov’s son Edyk had died, it was said that all the women who were pregnant that year would give birth to this person who had passed away, in other words, to Edyk. However, the real Edyk would be born to Vakhtangov’s family, and they would name the baby “Edyk.” This is what the *sovkhos* chief of this village had meant when she said to me “a dead person is reborn as many times as the ten fingers on both hands.” The real Koryak name of Edyk, which is Russian, is Chevayagilgin, which was his mother’s uncle’s name, and Edyk was said to be his reincarnation.

It is not the dead spirit itself that is reborn, but something that is passed on from one person to another. They say not only one, but also two or sometimes even three people can live inside one human being. However, one of them becomes the master and the others just accompany the master. Applying it to the former example, Edyk would be reborn inside many children, but the main reincarnation of Edyk – the “real” Edyk – is the child born to his family.

The newborn baby’s name is decided according to the dream the mother sees in her sleep. The gestures of a pregnant mother looks like someone’s gestures. For example, if it looks like Edyk’s gestures, she will give birth to Edyk. When the baby cries, the mother whispers different people’s names. The name whispered when the baby stops crying is the baby’s name. If they can’t find the right name, three women gather and hang a small stone by a thread from three wooden sticks crossed together. Then they say out loud different people’s names, and if the small stone starts moving that is the baby’s name.

People's spirit is called *unna*, which is the third person referring to “he” “her” or “it.” If the dead person has gone to the Other Side, this is the spirit of the deceased. The world on the Other Side is the country of the dead, which is also the upper world, although people don't call it the “upper world.” They use the word *nganenka*, which means “over there” or “the other side.” On the other hand, the world here on earth, or this world is called *woteng-jonatogengunik*, which means “this life.”

In addition, I was interested in the notion of the reindeer's rebirth, so I asked Alekseev about it. However, he said the reindeer are not reborn. He said that they are sent off to the “other side” with the deceased, but that is the end of it. Animals are different from human beings, he said. The reindeer on this earth are not related to the reindeer in the upper world. For instance, they made a symbolic reindeer at the funeral and sent it to Edyk. It was cut off from “this world,” and the procedure of sending it had finished. He said that the lives of the reindeer in this world have nothing to do with the upper world, concluding themselves. Indeed, they were herders that raised and managed reindeer, who thought of them as animals or even property – clearly distinguished from human beings – and sacrificed them to the spirits of the land or river as offerings. For such a group of people, this way of thinking is not something necessarily surprising. However, I had already seen how they treated the reindeer's bones, and I had no doubt this was based on the concept of the immortality of the reindeer's soul. What he was probably emphasizing was that the reindeer's rebirth doesn't have an individual personality unlike people's rebirth. They do send off a reindeer with the deceased, but they do so as a necessity for living his life in the world on the “other side,” in the same way they make him take the sleigh, spear and sewing kit. The reindeer bones, which they bury in the ground without sending them off, probably symbolize the reindeer's immortality, not in the world of the dead, but in some other world.

## 8.6 The Death Ritual and the Koryak Worldview

The Koryak death ritual is a procedure for handling the dead, which consists of a combination of several symbolic things based on their worldview. Of course, it is not merely a “corpse treatment” for them. They make their worldview substantial and keep reproducing it through their practice of “corpse treatment.” Moreover, they give various meanings to the customs practiced among them, or settle it by saying it is “tradition” from the past. In many cases, the way they give significance to customs is practical. However, those customs have another hidden meanings to them that they are not aware of. I am talking about meanings on a more universal level, which goes beyond an interpretation of one culture. I decided to think over how their death ritual looks from this kind of viewpoint.

The funeral is a procedure by which they send the dead person – or the soul

of the deceased, to be accurate – to the world on the Other Side. The world over there is in the east, from which the sun rises; at the same time it also refers to the “world above the sky,” or the upper world. Therefore, the corpse’s head is pointed toward the east, or to the northeast so that the sun doesn’t get into his eyes. The dog leads the way so that the evil spirits won’t block his passage to the upper world. The reindeer which is killed to be sent with the deceased is one of the daily necessities required to lead life in the upper world; it is the same as the new clothes, gloves, shoes, the spear, knife, sleigh, cane, the bag with the pine resin and sewing kit inside, the threads and lassos. They believe that the dead live in *yananas* and breed reindeer in the upper world, just as they do in the real world.

As far as the cutting up of the corpse goes, they say they do so because it is convenient when they cremate it. However, true though it may be, this rational explanation is just a practical interpretation. Stabbing the corpse with a knife and cutting it is “killing” the deceased, or dissecting the dead body. In the same way with the other animals such as the reindeer or dogs, it signifies the separation of the soul and body. The body with its soul separated is not the deceased anymore, but is merely a corpse. Reindeer meat is consumed by human beings and its bones are buried in the ground or the unburied bones are burnt in a fire. Dogs are killed and their bodies are cut up and given to ravens. In the same way, the dead body has to be deleted completely from this world. That is the way they send the spirit from this world to the world on the other side to make it come back to life again in this world – or to be more accurate, it is the circulation of the immortal spirit.

Therefore, they believe that the spirit is still present in, or near, the body before it is ritually killed, or before it is moved to the cremation site. That is the very reason why they change the body’s clothes so that the bare body won’t show, and why they prepare tobacco and tea for him, stay beside him all through the night and speak their last words to him. The deceased goes halfway to the upper world with the other people, and after being killed ritually at the crematory, he walks the rest of the way on his own.

The cremation site is a space where two different worlds, this world on earth and the upper world – or, to phrase it as they do, “this life” and “over there” – overlap with each other. The woman who plays the role of sending the deceased off ties a rope around her waist and arm. They explained that this was a sign to identify the woman who was to perform the duty. This practical explanation was certainly not wrong. But they had made the knot doubled. The knots on the dead body’s clothes or on the ropes tying the body were all doubled. Regarding this double-knot, I had been told that it was done so the body would not fall over even if the rope became undone. This rational explanation was not wrong either. However, I thought this double-knot was precisely the symbol of the border between the two different worlds – i.e. the *kekkaï* (boundary, border) as it is called in Buddhism and Shintoism in Japan. They

had made a *kekai* of this world around them to prepare for the deceased to enter the world on the other side. Women with the rope-sign were those who were going to send the deceased off to the other world; they were in charge of the most dangerous but responsible task.

Before the women sit on the platform beside the corpse, they undo one of the knots. The knots are undone to a single knot on the body's clothes as well. Natalia emphasized to me that both the women and the deceased are tied with single knots only. This means that the border is taken away. The border between the two worlds would be gone, and a special area for the deceased to move on from one world to the next would appear. When the women in charge stab the body with a knife and separate his spirit from it, they untie the ropes on them and put them beside the body that is going to be cremated. The women sit beside the corpse while the smoke rises high around them. They guard the dead spirit and lead it so that it won't get lost and come back to this world. The road to the crematory is already closed off at the village exit at this point. The spirit of the killed dog runs up to the deceased, or the master, and walks with its master along the path to the upper world, barking to ward off the evil spirits that stand in their way.

When people were leaving the site of the cremation, they took some grass, tied it and put it in their pockets. The primary meaning of this grass is a symbolic gift from the spiritual world, where this world and the upper world comes in contact. When they killed a dog last time, Natalia took home some grass and told me she would keep it in an important place, such as inside the bag where the *Gichigi* is kept, or under the pillow. They receive grass as a return gift from the other world, in return for sending the dog's spirit to the other world and offering its meat to the ravens. Of course, the grass itself has no real value, but it is worth something symbolically. Two years ago, when they sent a reindeer off to the country of the dead, I had seen them put a small beaded necklace around the antler. Now, Natalia told me that it was a gift to the reindeer, but it could be anything simple because anything simple or humble in this world would turn into something valuable in the other world. When they give a puppy to someone, they give the mother dog something that is not valuable in return. Vakhtangov said that even when a father accepts his daughter's marriage, the new husband gives him something not valuable but ordinary as a gift. In addition, as is mentioned later, when they share a hunted animal's meat among people such as relatives, those who receive the meat give back things that they have at hand and are not special, such as bullets or cigarettes. They emphasized to me that the things they give in return when they exchange things are not costly. It is like a token, or so to say a memento. It is a token of the relationship built there and of the exchange, but it is without practical value, which is exactly why it is something of great symbolic value – it becomes something precious in the other world. Consequently, it is not surprising to find out that the grass is a return gift from the spiritual world.

They keep this grass very carefully, because it has spiritual power. The grass itself doesn't have any power, but it is given that power because it is a gift received as a result exchanging things. Now, what exactly is the "power" here? They keep it carefully because it protects them from accidents, deaths or illnesses. The power here means the power to protect. The grass is a charm, or a talisman. Then what does it mean "to protect?" They believe that accidents, deaths and illnesses occur when people's spirits get lost or take somebody with them to the other world. Therefore, in order to protect people from evil spirits, the grass holds on to people's spirits here on earth and forms a boundary with the other world. When I had asked them at the crematory why they take the grass home, Natalia's son, Slava, explained to me by pointing to the sky – meaning the deceased goes to the upper world – and then also pointing to the ground – meaning we will remain on earth. Then he put a strand of tied grass in my pocket for me. The grass is rooted deeply in the ground; this must give it the symbolic power to hold back people's spirits on earth. The tied grass creates a boundary between this world and the upper world, protecting the people from evil spirits. This is the second meaning to the grass people take home.

The important thing when they send off the deceased is the women's role. She stays with the dead person's spirit, performing the task of bridging the spirit from this world to the other. She is a mediator of the spirit, and goes back and forth between this world and the other world, as the deceased does. However, this woman, who is in charge of the most important role in the death ritual, doesn't supervise the whole proceeding of the ceremony. Each member of the family, each person who is attending the ritual, according to the "tradition", performs the ceremony. She doesn't give any orders to people about the proceeding of the ceremony, nor does she have any spiritual or political power over them; in that sense, she is not the supervisor of the ceremony. She is the spiritual mediator who is in charge of the most important job at this ceremony – in other words, she is a shaman. In fact, besides her job of sending off the dead spirit, she even tells fortunes, which is one of the important jobs of a shaman, by the way the dead body's eyes open.

Besides the mediator, the ravens and the fire also have something to do with the connection between the two different worlds. Just before the corpse was carried out of the room, people kicked the body with their heels and imitated the cry of a raven. They kicked him so that he could then start walking along the path from this world to the upper world. The people who kicked him were ravens, which means that ravens play the role of carrying the deceased to the upper world. The ravens are messengers. This reminds me of a raven's myth of the Northwest Coastal Indians, in which the raven brings the sun to the human beings that were living in a dark world. The Koryaks cut up the sacrificed dog's body into small pieces and leave them in the grass on the tundra so that the ravens can eat and carry them above the sky. In the same way, the purpose of the fire at the cremation is to cremate the body. Just as the

ravens do, the fire eats the body up and carries it to the upper world. Therefore, the fire also plays a role as a messenger here.

The ravens, or fire, play a role as messengers because they combine the characteristics of both humans and of nature. Ravens are as wise as human beings, although they are birds. They form groups like human society and intrude into the life space of humans. Although the fire is a part of nature, human beings have control over it and it is something indispensable for human life. These are things that are situated on the border between culture and nature, and are things that go back and forth between the two worlds, crossing the boundary between them. The raven and the fire are messengers between the spiritual world and the human world.

The raven and the fire play the role of messengers between the world on earth and the upper world because people believe the world of the dead is in the upper world, and at the same time because the ravens are related to the sky and the fire is related to the sun. On the other hand, stones and water seem to be related to this world on earth. The symbolic reindeer that is sent to the upper world with the deceased is held down with stones not only because it has to be fixed to the ground as a remembrance of the ceremony, but to imply that the reindeer bones are supposed to go to a world, which is different to the upper world. I will write about this later with reference to the hunting ritual. In addition, before they go to the crematory they put pebbles on the dead body to hold it down to earth so that the spirit won't wander off from the body. The wooden cross that is put beside the pebbles is probably put there for the same purpose. A cross symbolizes the world and its centre, and also keeps the spirit there. As a matter of fact, they call it *rest*, which is the Russian word for the Christian cross – or it could be remnants of the Christian beliefs that reached as far as this place before the Revolution. The belief that the stones symbolize the world on earth also appears when they decide whose reincarnation a baby is by the movement of a small stone hung from a wooden frame made of three twigs. The wooden frame of three twigs is the basic structure of a *yanana*. The dead spirit, which comes down to this world from the upper world through the smoke hole of the *yanana*, abides at the stone and moves in response to the three women's voices.

When people come back from the cremation site to their house, they pour water over their heads toward the back. In general terms, this can be called a "purification," which means to get rid of ominous or impure things and purify oneself. However, it is thought to clear the spirit of the dead that might have followed them back and would prevent them from returning to this world, when they come back from the other world to this world. The road to the site of the cremation is closed off. From that point on, the road leads to the country of the dead. Those who have recently returned from there have come back to the land of the living. Consequently, "purification" also symbolizes crossing the border between the two worlds.

The fire probably has a purifying effect as well, because there were small

fires burning and smoking away on dishes in front of the houses. However, I must mention later on with reference to the hunting ritual, how the fires in front of the houses that welcome guests have another meaning. The fire symbolizes the *Gichigi* and is the guardian deity of that house. Guests salute the fire by offering an *inawet* to the fire that welcomes them. But the people who came back from the crematory didn't offer an *inawet* to the fire. In this situation, it is thought that it acts as a "purifier" rather than a welcome, in the same way the water does. Like water, it prevents the dead spirit from coming back to this world. The fact that fire symbolizes "purification" is probably related to the fire's capacity to burn things. The role of a "purifier" using water and fire could also be seen – besides when people returned from the crematory – when they purified the room after the corpse was carried out of the house. They got rid of the spirit of the deceased by touching all the rooms and every corner of the house with a burning alder, and washing the house with water.

Another thing that has an important significance regarding purification is the alder. The room and everything inside it was touched with a burning alder branch after the corpse was carried out of the room. The same alder branch was used to touch people after the cremation. However, we must be careful about one thing. The purification using the alder has a different meaning from the purification using water or fire. In the death ritual, I saw them using the alder in other ways, as follows: before the cremation, they put alder branches over the pile of dwarf Siberian pines, and lay the body over them; and after the cremation they surrounded the place with alder branches; and on the following day, they swept together and then covered the ashes with alder branches. In this situation, the alder plays the role of creating a boundary between the world of the deceased and that of the living.

In contrast with the ravens and fire that act as messengers crossing the border between this world and the other, the alder closes off the road between this world and the other – i.e. it acts as a boundary. In this sense, the alder has the same symbolic meaning as the tied ropes. The alder has such symbolic meanings in the Koryak worldview. In fact, among other Siberian ethnic groups, trees are often thought of as something that connects this world and the upper world. For example, the shaman of the Nanais, who live in the lower streams of Amur River in Primorski Krai, travels to the upper world to look for the spirit of the sick person. When he does that, he climbs up a white birch tree to show and demonstrate in front of the people that his spirit is actually travelling to the upper world. In Mongolia, the tree symbolizes the land, and the tree symbolically connects heaven and earth. However, this doesn't mean that the Koryaks do not have this kind of concept at all. At the reindeer sending ceremony held in memory of the dead, they stick a branch in the middle of the pile of food they prepare as an *inawet*, and the deceased in the upper world and the people on earth have a meal together there, as we had seen two years ago. If we were to find a difference in the symbolic meaning of the tree, it might be the way they use it; when

they make a border, or when they hold the branch in their hands and touch people or objects with it, they don't place the branch vertically to the ground, but horizontally. Or if we take in consideration the examples of Siberia or Mongolia again, we can say that although the tree is indeed something that links the earth with heaven and is the pathway to the upper world, the border between heaven and earth is at the point where the tree touches heaven – which means the tree itself doesn't go anywhere beyond being a symbol of the earth. If so, there is no wonder why the tree – which is the symbol of the land and this world at the same time – is used as a border marking between this world and the world on the other side. They enclose the other world, and within it the dead spirit that should belong there, by surrounding the crematory with alder branches, the symbol of this world. Therefore, the people who come back from the crematory being touched with the alder branch signifies that they were able to cross the border from the other world and return to this world again.

At the cremation site, people wrestled and played games competing to get the ball. They explained to me that they did this to let the deceased know that the people were having fun. Natalia, as well, said that it was to draw people's attention away from the deceased. People grow absorbed in the enjoyable life of this world and say farewell to the deceased, refusing to go to the world on the other side with him. Therefore, the dead person can't take anybody with him. This sounds like a reasonable explanation, but I think there is another meaning to the games they do at the crematory, besides this practical reason. Wrestling is not only done at funerals, but also at other festivals or trading spots. Consequently, the common question here is, why do they hold competitive games at funerals, festivals and trading spots?

The essence of the competitive games that we are talking about here is their recreational competitiveness. They consist of the ritual conflict between and reconciliation of opposing groups. Clashing with each other in this competitive playground, forming a place where they can come together solves conflicts between men and women, men and men, between two groups, here. This is a factor that is common to the wrestling games, the ball games, or the reindeer-sleigh races, footraces or tug-of-war competitions held at other festivals.

The scene of a cremation or a festival is a space where the two different worlds – this world and the world on the other side – come in contact with each other, a space that is free of borders. It is a special place where there is no distinction between the living and the dead or between reality and the supernatural. They see the same situation at a trading spot. Americans or Russians, who are people from a different world, come in contact with the Koryaks and exchange goods by negotiating with each other – this is how they trade. Hence, the funeral, festival, trading spot, and the competitive playground are originally places with the same characteristics.

I had a strange feeling hearing the cheers and laughs of people absorbed in the

games at the crematory, a place that is usually supposed to be solemn and sorrowful since a body is being cremated. This seemingly chaotic situation was happening in a place that was in itself “chaotic.” To keep things “in order” is to classify them, sort them out, and to give them a boundary. This special place, where the two worlds met and the border was taken away, was a place where there was no order. This special place could be called the place of “original oneness.” “Original oneness” is a concept in which different things are thought to be originally identical. The Canadian Indians, who are reindeer hunters, believe that human beings and animals were originally one. When they hunt, they communicate with the animals in their dreams and get their consent to be hunted. In the same way that animals talk in human language in myths, the boundary between animals and humans is taken away in dreams. This place of “original oneness” is also seen at the Bear-sending Ceremony of the Ainu. They welcome the bear, which is a deity (*kamui* in Ainu), receive its meat and fur as a gift by killing it, and then send its spirit to the world of the deity, giving them home-brewed alcohol, offerings of sticks with curled wood shavings and millet-cakes in return. The festival is a place where the human and the deity (*kamui*) communicate with each other; some people wear the bear-fur and play around imitating the bear that was killed. At this festival they play tug-of-war games, sing and dance. In addition, at a shamanistic ritual in Inner Mongolia, I had seen the spirit that they worship enter the shaman’s body and create a place where it unified with the shaman. I had also seen them hold horse races or wrestling matches at the rituals where they offered prayers to heaven. In their practice of rituals, festivals and shamanism, they were creating a place where there were no distinctions between humans and animals, or humans and gods, and were experiencing it.

In the Koryak myth, the origin of reindeer herding was related to the children’s play and dreams. Plays and dreams are originally from a world without order; people can come in contact with the supernatural world freely there transcending time or space. The place of “original oneness” and play are inseparable from each other. In that sense, “playing” originally has the power to destroy order. At the crematory, they get rid of the world’s order using the power of “playing,” and create a place of “original oneness” as a shamanistic space.

The death ritual is a part of a larger cyclical ritual of human spirits, related to the death and birth of humans. At the same time, it is also a clear practice of shamanism, though inconspicuous. Through their practice of the death ritual, they become aware again of their worldview – what death is, what life is, and how this world is related to the other world – and keep reproducing it. The various symbols tell us the universal significance that stands beyond them and their practical meanings. Nothing else but this whole concept is what we can call their tradition.

The border between this world and the other side that I had seen there isn’t something with a clear borderline and a checkpoint. It is a pathway from this world

to the world on the other side, and it is the procedure of walking along it. That pathway starts from the village, the crematory is halfway, and it leads to the country of the dead ahead of it. Led by the dog, the deceased must walk along a straight and beautiful road, just as I had seen in my dream eating *mukhomor*. Then he probably sees the *yananas* and his relatives that live there. They will run up to him and ask him all about life on earth. He would have become that country's resident by then.

Maria, who was in charge of sending off the deceased, had an important role to play here. It wasn't important just as a procedure of the ritual. It was the important responsibility toward the deceased of sending him off to the other world. The harsh ritual procedure of stabbing the body with a knife was her kindness to the deceased. Maria was accompanying him for his sake. Maria undertook the responsibility, not only of his death, but also of his life in the other world. The Japanese popular Buddhist customs for funeral and way of thinking – where the price of the offering depends on the number of priests who recite the sutra, and where the posthumous Buddhist name has different prices according to its kind – didn't exist there. The responsibility and infinite affection towards human's life and death – which is what religion is originally supposed to be about – is still living as their tradition in the Koryak lifestyle.