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Chapter 8

The Role of Dogs in Nanai Cults

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The Nanai people belong to the Tungus-Manchurian language family. Their use of dogs in hunting and fishing activities has great importance in their traditional culture. Its economic role is well reflected through its images in their worldview, ceremonies, and folklore.

Until the beginning of the twentieth century, the system of Nanai beliefs was represented by a synthesis of traditional views (shamanism and more ancient animistic beliefs) and borrowed religions such as Buddhism and Christianity. In particular, we can identify evidence of these cultural contacts in ceremonial practice. Through interaction with other cultures their belief system was exposed to certain changes over a long time period in the same way as other aspects of traditional life. This fact is also well reflected in various multi-structural ceremonies, in which dogs play a significant role.

The essential part of the ceremony for negotiation with gods and spirits was the sacrificial ritual. People usually offered sacrifices to ask the gods and spirits to be friendly and help them. The same kind of sacrifice was also practiced during funeral rituals. At the same time, some elements of real productive activities can be observed in the funeral ceremony. The spiritual world and real life were thus closely interwoven in the worldview of the Nanai. We can see this fact not only in actual ceremonial practice but also in the worldview that forms its basis. Their representation of the next world, for example, clearly indicates their complex worldview. It is well known that the Nanai, like the other peoples on the Amur basin, considered that the world of dead was a mirror reflection of the world of the living, and that the souls of the dead would go to the next world to live as if they were alive.

Mythology and ceremonial practices concerning death reveal the special role of dogs, which differs among the different subgroups of the Nanai. This indicates that dogs played an extremely significant role that was characteristic to each regional or linguistic subgroup of the ethnos.

Each of the hunter-gatherer ethnic groups of the Russian Far East had its own specific funeral ceremony, but it may be assumed that they all shared a common root. Some rituals and elements of these ceremonies even exhibit similarities with those of the Chinese and Manchurian peoples. Such common roots and the similarity of funeral rituals indicate close cultural and genetic contacts within a huge region. One of the analogies between the funeral ceremonies of the Nanai and Chinese-Manchurian people can be particularly clearly seen in the ceremony to be carried out immediately after the burial. Among the Chinese and Manchurians, relatives of the deceased burnt paper images of money, animals, birds, dogs

and so on, on top of the grave (Lopatin 1922: 292). In this paper I shall focus on the final item, images of dogs. Burning of such paper images can be assumed to represent a transformation of a sacrifice, in which the victims would originally have really been killed in the ancient style. Instead of killing real dogs, Chinese and Manchurian people burnt pieces of paper on which images of dogs were drawn. We may conclude that they possessed the concept of dog sacrifice.

Among the Nanai, as P. P. Shimkevich insisted at the end of the nineteenth century, dogs were the most important sacrificial animal of the funeral ritual. He wrote, “When they [the Nanai] put a coffin into a grave and filled it with earth, the wife of the deceased took from the settlement his favorite dog, killed her on the grave and suspended the body from a stick stuck near the coffin, and threw a sheet of skin of an elk or Siberian stag onto the dog” (Shimkevich 1896: 20). One can assume that as a rule the ritual killing of a real animal is much more archaic than the practice of burning paper images, but there are exact parallels between them.

I once heard a well-known philologist, N. B. Kile, tell how his grandmother killed pups in a traditional way, though this case did not directly concern a funeral ritual. When she rejected some newborn pups, she tightened nooses around their necks and lifted them up. According to Shimkevich, the sacrifice of a dog on a grave of a Nanai hunter was carried out by using a stick. Thus there are two methods of sacrificial killing: suffocation in a noose and killing by using a stick. Both methods, which have been recorded among other peoples on the Amur basin as well as the Nanai, are of ancient origin. A similar ritual of the sacrifice of a dog took place on the grave of a dead Udehe hunter. According to their tradition, the dog was killed by hitting it on the head with a stick, accompanied by the words *Ga, khanti dasiya!* (“Go behind the owner!”) The corpse of the dog was buried near the grave of its owner¹. In the case of the Nivkh, people killed an entire dogsled team on the grave of a dead man (Kreinovich 1930: 52).

Funeral ceremonies, and in particular the methods of killing sacrificial animals used by the Tungus-Manchu speaking peoples, have both specific and general features that tell us about their common ancestors. The ethnic history of the Nanai, who were not a literate people, has been described in the Chinese-Manchurian chronicles and the *skazka* (“stories”) of Russian settlers. However, the patrimonial legends, *telungu*, can contribute just as much as the written documents to disclosing mysterious pages of the histories of Tungus-Manchurian peoples. The events of the past have been reproduced in those legends with a sufficient degree of reliability for many years. V. A. Avrorin said, “*Telungu* legends contain stories about the origin and splitting of clans, about inter-patrimonial wars, about resettlement of clans, about cases of patrimonial revenge, etc.” (Avrorin 1986: 12).

Telungu legends, which tell how the ancestors of the Nanai clans came to this land, enjoyed great popularity among researchers as well as the people themselves. Analysis of some of the plots, in which transport animals such as dogs, horses, and deer are mentioned, indicates the extremely complicated ethno-genetic components of the modern Nanai people. For example, the Passar clan, which stemmed from the Solon people², is a clan that originated from the red wolf *Iorgula*. But there is some indirect proof of their “horse-breeder origin.” I once wrote down a patrimonial *telungu* legend of horsemen-ancestors

who arrived on the coast of *Mangbo* (Amur), which I heard from an informant of this clan. According to the *telungu*, warriors came on an iron brigantine, but their footwear was not suitable for moving on ice. It predetermined their defeat in the conflict with the local inhabitants wearing footwear made from fish leather, which did not slip³⁾. A. N. Lipsky confirmed the hypothesis of the horsemen-ancestors of the Passar clan, saying that the “Nanai of Passar clan took their soul on the horse” (Arkhir MAE RAN f.5, d.12, l.314). However, this has been challenged by A. N. Smoliyak (Smoliyak 1991: 161).

It is said that some Nanai clans such as the Kile, Donkan, Samar, and Tumali are of Tungus (or Evenk, who are one of the typical reindeer breeding ethnic groups in Siberia and Far East Russia) origin. The Samar clan, which is one of the “new arrivals” among the Nanai, kept reindeer until the 1930s (Karger and Koz'minskii 1929). This fact indicates that they are of Evenk origin.

Fragments of unwritten history told in the *telungu* clearly illustrate the heterogeneity of the Nanai ethnic group. We may infer that the Passar people were once horse breeders and that the Samagir (Samar), Kile, Donkan, Tumali and so on were deer clans in the past. But if these hypotheses can be accepted, other questions remain: who were the original dog breeders, and which group is the real indigenous population of the region? The Hojer clan can be considered to be one of the basic applicants. In the etymology of the Nanai language, the word *hejen* or *hedien*, which is included in the clan name, implies the “lower people,” i.e. people living in the lower basins of the Amur River.

Having lost their horses and deer, new settlers joined the ethnic entity of the indigenous population and learnt dog breeding. We should note that they might speak languages of the Tungus-Manchurian group as well as the basic language of the ancient settlers of Amur River. The language similarity allowed them to communicate easily with the local people and to adapt to a new socio-cultural environment. Though the Nivkh were not part of this language generality, practically all their vocabulary concerning dog breeding is of Tungus origin. This can be inferred from a comparison of the names of dog sleds of the Amur peoples, including the Nivkh. E. A. Kreinovich has carried out the following analysis. “The common names of sleds of the peoples of Lower Amur basin were close to the Tungus word *turki* (a sled), e.g., *toki* (Nanai), *tuki* (Lower Nanai), *kaur toki*, *para* (in Lower people, *param tuki*), *pukchilesu* (in all the Nanai groups), *tuki*, *na tuchini* (Ulchi), *tolgoki*, and *tolki* (in the Nanai near the Tunguska River). All the terms that are linguistically related to *tuki/toki* imply kinds of sleds” (Kreinovich 1930). It seems that the Nivkh borrowed their word for “sled” from neighbors who spoke Tungus languages (Smolyak 1984: 110).

Having adapting themselves to their new lifestyle and sociocultural environment by joining the structure of local clans on the Amur basin, the Tungus immigrants in turn adopted the ceremonial practice of their new ethnic neighbors, as well as introducing them to elements of their own ancient views. The use of new ceremonies became traditional for the former deer and horse breeders as well as for the indigenous population.

One of the outstanding representations of the role of dogs among the Nanai can be seen in the funeral ceremony of sending off the soul of the dead person to the next world. This ceremony was carried out by a shaman of the highest rank, *kasa shaman*. *Kasa tauri* is

the ceremony of final commemoration. As many researchers have already addressed this question, we will not describe all the details of this ceremony here; it is necessary, however, to pay close attention to the ritual of transportation of the soul of the dead with the help of the shaman.

It is no accident that we are given the information about the origin of some Nanai clans from their patrimonial legends. Sending the soul of the deceased off to the next world was an integral part of the ritual complex *Kasa tauri*. A major role in this ceremony is played by spirits of dogs, on which the shaman took the soul of the dead person. Originally, the souls of deceased persons from Tungus clans were sent on their final journey on deer, whereas the souls of deceased persons of Mongolian and Manchurian origin were taken by shaman on horses. In the same way, deceased people from indigenous clans of the Amur basin were sent by dog team. However, when the ethnic and cultural distinctions were “washed away” in the process of the adaptation of the new settlers, representatives of all the clans began to carry out the *Kasa* ceremony under a uniform script, whereby souls of deceased should be taken by the spirits of dogs. This implies that, having lost their traditional transport animals and acquired the custom of dog breeding, the clans of Tungus origin that had joined the Nanai ethnos appropriated the ceremonial practice connected with dogs, which were dominant locally.

The neighbors of the Nanai people, the Ulchi and Nivkh, did not have any alternative in choosing a “transport animal.” The dog was unique for them both in the real world and in the next world, though their origin was no less motley than that of the Nanai. Both Tungus and Ainu origin can be traced in the Ulchi clan structure (e.g., the Kuisali clan and a part of the Duwan clan). The people originating in the lowest part of the Amur basin, the Ducher (the Duchely clan), played an important role in the formation of this ethnic entity. The Ainu people took part in the formation of the Nivkh as well.

We must note that shamans used a special stock in their ceremonial practice with wild animals that took place in this ritual. This stock also had a ceremonial function. Along with the traditional images of assistant spirits, e.g., a *kori* bird and a *buchi*, the shaman used an *ochio*, a ritual dog sled. The sled was passed down from one shaman to another, and it often became “decayed” after being used through generations, therefore periodically requiring repair.

The sled had to undergo “special preparation” before the ceremony. A *tudin* fortune teller helped the shaman and also checked the shaman’s status. For example, the shaman asked what kind of nail should have been pulled out from the sled, and the *tudin* answered him. The *tudin* “saw” where and with what the shaman had tied the sled. Thus, the shaman and *tudin* were checked by each other (Smolyak 1991: 49). Images of *mukda*, the souls of the deceased, were put into the sled and taken to the next world by the shaman with the help of dogs, the transport animals in this case.

According to animistic belief, everything has a soul. There is no doubt that the *ochio* mythical sled possessed by the shaman also has a soul. No one is able to “see” it, however, because it does not have a physical body. A brilliant performance must therefore be put on for ordinary participants of the ceremony, in which the main roles are played by the shaman and *tudin*. To the eyes of the ordinary people in the audience, the ceremonial actions appear

dull: the shaman sits on a board that symbolizes the ritual sled during the holding of the ceremony.

Dogs were used not only in funeral ceremonies but also in other kinds of ritual practice of the Nanai people. They took on important symbolic roles in people's dreams. For example, when a hunter dreamed of the barking of a black dog, this was warning him of the presence of malicious spirits (Smolyak 1991: 50).

Dogs have a major role in magical ceremonies directed to the protection of newborn children in the cultures of the Ulchi, Nivkh, and Nanai. If children in an Ulchi family died one after the other, the old house was destroyed and a new one built in its place (or a neighboring plot) after the death of the baby and before the birth of the next child. When this was done, dog heads were placed under the main poles of the framework of the house. "When a dog barks, the devil goes away," explained A. Kotkin, an Ulchi. Dog fangs, as well as bear fangs, were often hung up over the bed of a newborn child as an original protector (Smolyak 1978: 227). This is the same magical practice as in the previous case, whereby the people utilize the mystical power of dogs.

The Nivkh also had similar beliefs connected with dwellings. They seldom changed residence, but when they did, they arranged a sacrifice in honor of the new "owner of the area" in a new place. A red dog was killed in the forest, and then the "owner of the area" ate ritual food, the remains of which were offered to the others. It is probable that during the course of this ceremony a special ritual named *Tif ard* was carried out. People killed four sacrificial dogs, smeared inside the corners of the newly constructed house with their blood, and hung the skulls of the dogs on the four outside corners of the building (Savel'eva and Taksami 1970: 370). This ceremony represents the extremely ancient human-dog cooperative relationship. The human-dog relationship can be traced back to the upper Paleolithic Age, and one can assume that protecting human beings against hostile animals and malicious spirits was one of the oldest roles of this animal. This role was symbolically transferred onto parts of its body, in particular to the head. The Nivkh used the skull of a dog, *kan tenr*, as a sentry. It was hung down from the ceiling of the house by a loop made from tree fibers so as to protect dwellers from malicious spirits. The Nanai people have similar beliefs about dog skulls in connection with dwellings. Until recent years, dog skulls were usually put under the angular poles of the future dwelling when the house was being constructed. Although we do not have any information about the ceremony which was held before the ceremony of placing the skulls, probably they were from sacrificial dogs killed in order to protect the house from malicious spirits. Some similarities can be clearly seen between the ceremonies of the Nanai and Nivkh, who have had few close relations.

In the 1960s, the Nanai from the Kondon village of Khabarovsk Province used the blood of a black dog taken from an incision in its ear during the ceremony for the eating meat from a hunted bear. Wood shavings (*saory*) were smeared with the blood of the dog and put into a hole specially made in the bear's skull. I myself witnessed this ritual when I took part in the *puresiuri* ceremony for eating bear meat in 1971 in this village⁴). The similar transformation of a ceremonial action among the Nivkh was described by E. A. Kreinovich. He wrote, "If it is a pity to kill a dog, they make an incision in the ear of the dog devoted to the owner of the sea, *tol'niglan hanin* (the name of the dog), smear the

blood on grass and the branches of an alder or other tree, and throw them into the sea. The dog's soul, as Kurchuk said, will go to the owner of the sea and will pull *kharchi*, the name given to sacrificial offerings. Blood replaces the dog as the soul's home in this case" (Kreinovich 1930: 40). It is probable that the ceremony was limited to a cut in the past and completed to its logical end. With the passage of time, the ceremony has been transformed. Killing an animal has been replaced by smearing something with its blood without killing it. This can be explained as the conversion of an archaic ceremonial action to a modern conditional action. We should note that this transformation occurred under the influence of human attitudes to animals among the present-day Nanai people; good hunting dogs are even more valuable in the modern age than they were in the past.

My personal experience can confirm the important role of dogs as guardians of children's life and health. I can well remember that when I lost a "milk tooth" as a child I would usually wrap it in a slice of bread and give it to one of our dogs. The Nivkh used dog wool to protect a newborn baby. They tied a thread made from dog wool fibers and nettles to the baby's legs and arms. One of the child's milk teeth was given to the dog from which the wool was taken (Kreinovich 1930: 50).

In conclusion, analysis of the materials described above enables us to elucidate the importance of dogs in the traditional rituals and magical practices of the Nanai people, as well as in their economic life. Further analysis of these materials will permit us to clarify more aspects of the origins and processes of establishment of the Nanai ethnic group.

Notes

- 1) This description is based on my own field data collected in Krasnyi Yar village (Pozharskii District, Primorie Province) in 1997.
- 2) The Solon are one of the Tungus-Manchurian peoples who live in the present northeastern provinces and Inner Mongolia in China. Although they had lived in the upper basins of the Amur River and Zeya River until the seventeenth century, the Manchurian dynasty (Qing) ordered them to move to Inner Mongolia to protect the border with the Russian Empire.
- 3) I heard this *telungu* from A. A. Passar during field research carried out in Khabarovsk in 1998.
- 4) I took part in the *puresiuri* ceremony for eating bear meat in Kondon village (Solnechnyi District, Khabarovsk Province) in 1971.

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