

On Some Contemporary Animistic Rites
of the Tungusic
Peoples of Siberia and the Ainu (field materials)

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Introduction.

Animism is an early form of religious view. At present it is preserved among practically all the indigenous peoples of Siberia and the Far East. Its manifestations are most often observable nowadays in the taiga and tundra, where the people, herding of reindeer, engaging in hunting and fishing, live in accordance with the ancient traditions of their ancestors, isolated far from the centres of distribution of the modern culture.

According to the concept of animism, everything in nature is spiritualized. Hills, stones, trees, deceased people and dead animals, objects, made by humans, and etc., all have spirits. In accordance with it, to all that is spiritualized, a respectful attitude should be displayed.

Most animistic actions and rites are performed by elder generations, less often by average. However not infrequently, young people receive religious training from their parents and relatives are subjected to animistic rites.

Some of these ritual actions have undergone changes in time, but have preserved, nevertheless, their main essence.

During my inquiry's ethnographic research in the North and the Far East regions I rather frequently met with various animistic rites,

which were executed by the indigenous population for spirits of the district, animals, plants and other objects of animate and inanimate nature. As a rule, the purpose of these ritual actions was to propitiate these who spirits, existed in the imagination of the person so that they have supplied the patronage and well-being of the family and the individual, and, on the contrary, have not harmed them.

Actions toward particular objects.

The most clearly the appropriate and valid attitude toward spirits is displayed in the bear cult. According to the belief of the Siberian peoples and Ainu, the bear's spirit continues to live its death. In many ethnoses of Siberia and the Far East, including Tungusian, many imaginations were connected with the bear, which was considered as someone, related to supernatural forces, who was considered as relative of the person, etc. The specific attitude to the bear is not casual. On the northern tundra and taiga, the bear is the strongest representative of the animal world. Quite often it became the reason for the death of the domestic animals and people. Some anatomic similarity between of the bear's body without skin and the human body furthered the imaginations that the bear is considered as the people's relative. All these factors caused many religious beliefs and superstitions. The survivals of this ancient cult still continues to exist among the Siberian peoples even today.

The reindeer-herding Evenkis and Evens of East Siberia is provided with reindeer's meat and rarely hunt for bear. When suddenly meeting with a bear, Evenkis and Evens try to drive the animal away usually saying to it "Go, grandfather, don't touch us", they think that the bear, as a human relative, can understand their speech.

The fact that reindeer-herders very rarely kill the bear, reveals in full measure the archaic animistic views of the Tungus.

During one of my expeditions to Evens, on the Okhotsk seacoast, I became a witness to the special attitude of reindeer-herders to bear.

Periodically one bear had been coming to the barn where reindeer-herders kept their food and eating it. The Evens decided to kill the bear. For this purpose stage was built, on this stage a reindeer-herders with a gun waited for the bear to come. The bear was shot several times from that stage. Then the Evens asked the bear's body to excuse them for the murder. The meat was eaten, and the reindeer-herders put the bear's internal organs into the mountainous river and they were been taken away by the flow of the stream. At the burial place above the ground a ceremonial funeral was organized for the bear's remains. For that, a special stage was built on three cut larches, called "gulik", about two meters above the ground. The Bear's skull was carefully cleared from meat and fixed by the malar bones on the front bearings of the stage, called "chuki". The skin and pads of the animal were put into a bast matting bag and placed on the floor of larch branches on the stage. Near to the air burial place of the bear, on young trees, the Evens hang sacrificial shreds, called "hunmatin", intended as a gift for the animal. Following the Even's words, this rite had to propitiate the bear's spirit and to further the transmigration of it into a new material shell — into a new bear (see Fig.1, 2).

The aboveground honorary burial preserved the remains of the bear, a human relative, from dogs, rodents and other forest inhabitants. By the Evens's opinion, the propitiation of the bear's spirit guaranteed both the future success in hunting for the bear and safety for the reindeer-herders, their families, and properties.

However, in this case the rite was simplified to some extent. Farther the Evenkis and Evens put the all bear's bones in anatomic order on the stage.

On the contrary, by the Even's explanation, the non-execution of the rite prevents the rebirth of the bear, and embittered it's spirit, which was fraught with many troubles both for the animal's killer and his relatives independently of their location.

In the summer of 1982, in the Penzhina region of Kamchatka village Slautnoe, an old Even man killed a bear near his house in the village because that bear had been trying to enter a barn with provisions. During the cutting of the bear's carcass, children took away one of his pads. When the old man this found out, he was caught by confusion. He didn't know what to do. Since the loss of the most important part of the bear's body did not allow him to hold the rite of honorary burial and the propitiation of the animal's spirit.

The Ainu's reverence of the bear achieved peculiar progress and was notable for its complication and specific originality. A bear who was kept in a cage was ceremonially slaughtered on the special bear's festival. Today, real bear's festivals are not held in Hokkaido anymore; only dramatized performances resembling the festival are played for tourists. Nevertheless, reverence of the bear is mainstained by the Ainu as before. In 1987, in the village of Nibutani, I saw heads of bears killed during the hunt in the "nusasan" — sacred fence, built near the house of a hunter. Host of this fence noted that the spirits of bears were propitiated and "sent" to the "ancestor's country" according to the Ainu traditions.

Besides bears, other furbearing animals are respected somewhat less by the Tunguses. In the mountainous regions of Kamchatka, the Evens said every time after successfully hunting for mountain sheep,

“Excuse us, sheep, that we killed you.”

The peoples of the Far East also fulfil interesting animistic rites with regard to trees. The vegetation, and in particular, different kinds of trees, are revered for their important role in supporting the lives of the people.

Moreover, many peoples of North Asia have special attitudes to trees which are still connected with representations about the origin of the first man who was, as a rule, the ancestor of some ethnic community. Follow the Evenki legend, “bogatyř” (athlete) Kodakchon was born from a tree (see 1], p.185). By the Ainu legend, their ancestor named Ainurakur was born from an elm (see [3], p.23). Following the popular beliefs of various Amur peoples (Nivh, Orok, Negidal and others) humanity is descended from the spirits of trees (see 5], p.432, p.531; also see 2], p.333). Another people, for example the Ul’chi, thought that humans after death could change into trees (see [4], p.132). In the Evenki popular belief, the fall of a tree means somebody’s death. When a tree falls, the Evenkis say for safety of a young man’s life: “Fall to the side of so-and-so old man”.

Also as in the case of the animals, the use of wood for different purposes (the building of houses and subsidiary construction, the making of the means of conveyance and the instruments of production, etc.) require propitiation of the tree’s spirit. It is achieved by a means of equivalence, from the human’s point of view, exchange and sacrifice. For example, the Ilimpii Evenkis (in the Nijnyaya Tunguska’s river basin) ask to be forgiven by each tree they cut down, and stick a twig into the stump, thinking that the tree’s spirit will be satisfied by this change and will not make claims upon a human. The Evens of the Okhotsk seacoast make the same procedure with respect to conifers from which the bark is

stripped and used for covering tents, barns and other shelters. Near the village Ketanda on the Okhotsk seacoast, I observed one such event. To protect a winter sleigh (drawn by reindeer) from rain the Evens stripped bark from several larches. After making suitable formulaic excuses, they tied long shreds of colored material ("hunmatin") to parts of each tree without bark. In this case, the sacrificial shreds were a substitute for the bark (see Fig.3, 4).

Adentical actions are performed by the Ainu of Hokkaido. Every time a tree is cut down, one or several "inau" — whittled sticks which are considered as especially sacred objects - are made in a sacrifice for its spirit. Usually "inau" are left in the place of a tree's falling.

The Ainu had a special attitude toward a tree from which they made a hollowedout boat. The spirit of this tree was supposedly in the lower part, the "sarka" of the felled tree. Rice, tobacco and four "inau" which were stuck in the ground near the "sarka" were endowed with this spirit. It is considered that such actions will allow tree to take a new life in the country of spirits as a creature of a higher order.

Besides sacrificial "inau" for trees, the Ainu also perform similar sacrifices to mountain spirits, where garb, e.i. trees grown on any hill, was considered as the wood for construction. In this case, "inau" were considered as a replacement for of the lost part of a dress of the "forest's host" (see [6],p.115- 117).

Actions connected with abstract objects which exist in human imagination.

Until now the Evenkis and Evens think that health, well-being, and even the lives of humans depend upon the master spirits of certain localities. A disrespectful attitude towards spirits realized in non-

observance of ceremonies, disrespectful speech (abuse, swearing etc.) to this spirit, noisy shouting in the area, undressing up to the waist etc. can cause its displeasure and a very negative reaction. The Evenkis and Evens think that the results of this displeasure are different bad events: the aggravation of the weather and precipitation, which are the reasons of injuries for domestic animals and people, slipped or dropped into mud; catching cold and illnesses, the loss of reindeer; attacks of beasts of prey upon animals and people; death in the streams and mountains, and others. On the contrary, exemplary behaviour and the observance of ceremonies elicit positive emotions from the spirit, its patronage, and its good attitude. When passing through mountain-passes, the Evens reindeer-herders of the Okhotsk seacoast and Kamchatka always sacrifice to spirits something from their pockets, for example, a coin, a cartridge, shred of material, some food, or several drops of alcohol.

If, nevertheless, the weather aggravates or somebody falls ill, the Evenkis and Evens do some actions according to the concrete circumstances, these actions are directed toward propitiating the spirit. During my stay at the reindeer nomad camp of the Ilimpii Evenkis, in the taiga, one man fell ill. Two old women took out from a pack bag a piece of white cotton material, about 30cm x 40cm in size, and cut by scissors on one long side several little triangles as decorations. Then they brought this shred to the taiga, the supposed living place of the master-spirit and there hung it up on a tree in an open condition, simultaneously they asked the spirit for the convalescence of their kinsman. This sacrificial shred was named "lokoptin". Earlier Evenkis named the skin of sacrificial reindeer by this term. This skin was hung up on a tree. The relatives of the man who fell ill ate the reindeer's meat and entertained the master-spirit of the area with pieces of the meat. With passing time, this rite

changed and was simplified. The Evenkis began to hang up on a tree a piece of material instead of an animal's skin (see Fig.5).

In a central part of Kamchatka, in the living area of Bistrinsk Evens, I observed another event of propitiation to the region's spirit. During the rain which continued three weeks, and was believed to have been started by Russians in the hills (by their disrespectful attitude to the "host of area"), two women made a small campfire near the foot of the hill. The women put in it some pieces of reindeer's meat. Near the camp fire, a short speech was said, in which the reindeer-herders's wives asked the spirit to stop the rain. They announced that the burned meat go immediately to the spirit by the shortest way. It is interesting to note that on the next day, the rain stopped.

In the North the universal spirit-helper is a spirit-host of home hearth. Some people identify it with an old man (Evens of Yakutia), another people identify it with an kind old woman (Evenkis, people of Ainu and others). Before every meal the Evenkis and Evens are sure "to feed" the fire by the same food and drinks (meat, fish, alcohol, etc.). They do it not only in the tents and the "chum" (traditional dwelling of the Tungus) on basic stops of reindeer-herders but also on the brief stops in the taiga and tundra.

In conclusion, several words should be said about the attitude toward the souls of dead people. Most peoples of Siberia and the Far East maintain a fear for the souls of dead people. The Evenki and Even reindeer-herders try to never stop on the place where someone died. Everybody avoids to go to this place. "Chum" of a dead person (correctly, its base part), as a rule, is left in the taiga. The Tunguses think that it has to be a dwelling for the dead person in the next world. The Evenkis and Evens think that the graves of shamans have a special

danger because around these graves the wicked spirits are gathering, against which shamans fought during their lives.

Everything the Evenkis and Evens leave on the graves of dead relatives is broken, without fail. This is done to free the spirits of the objects which can go to the next world following after its dead master. The Tunguses break cups, taking out the pieces of plates, making holes in pots with nails, and ripping bedclothes. The Ainu people beat out the bottoms of wooden tubs on the graves of the kinsmen. The Ainu are "sending" the bears and other animals to the "spirit world" and are beat out skulls to free souls.

Thus, the facts which are written above are witness to the extraordinary vitality of the ancient animistic beliefs of the people of Siberia and the Far East which have been maintained until today.

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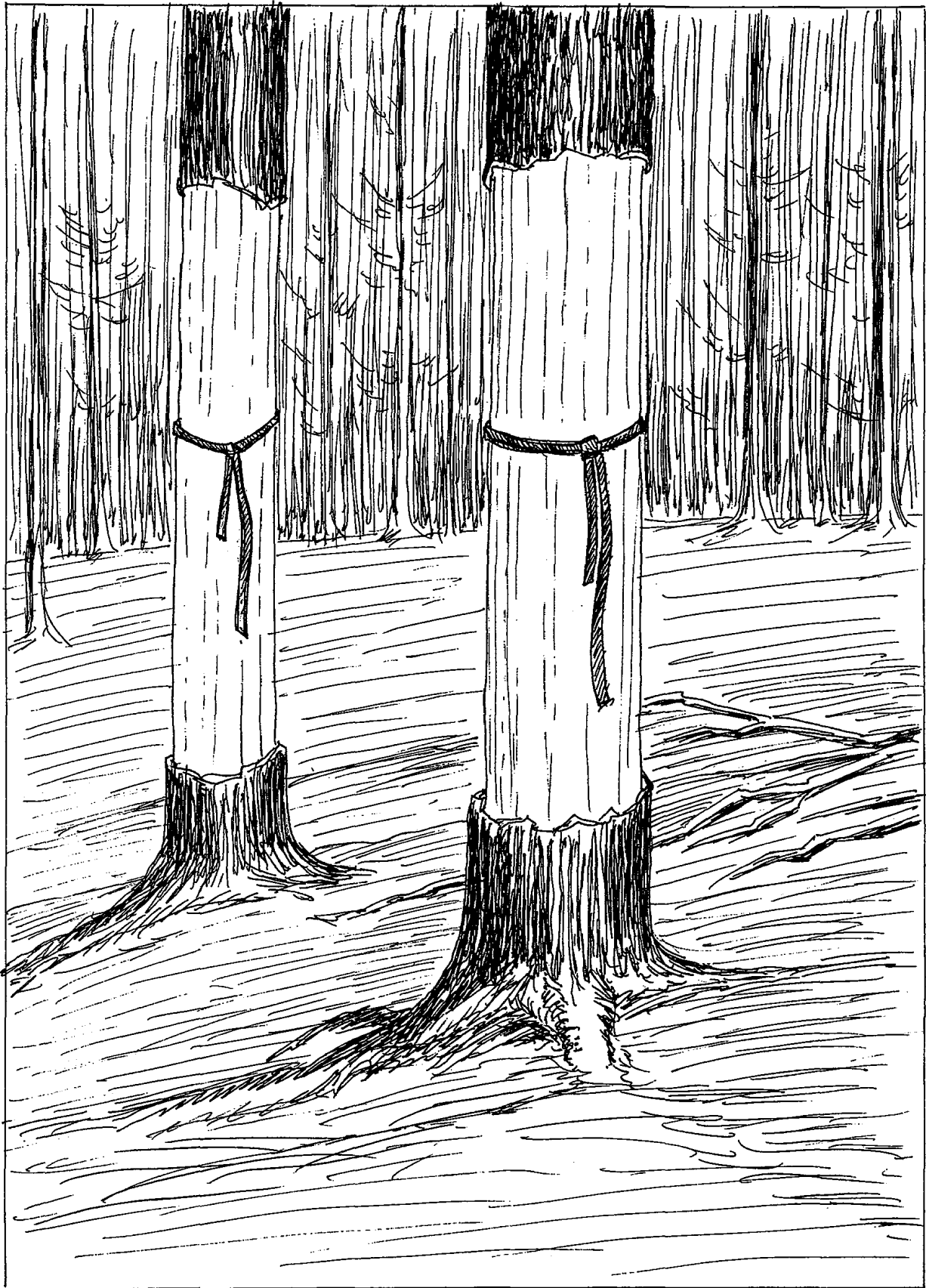
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1. "Gulik" (side-view). Okhotsk seacoast.



2. "Gulik" (view from behind).



3. "Hunmatin". Okhotsk seacoast.



4. Storage for a winter sleigh. Okhotsk seacoast.



5. "Lokoptin". Nijnyaya Tunguska's river basin.