

TRADITIONAL PRINCIPLES OF NATURAL RESOURCE USE AMONG INDIGENOUS PEOPLES OF THE LOWER AMUR RIVER

A.V. Smolyak

Traditional principles of natural resource use among indigenous peoples of the Lower Amur were determined by several factors, especially historical and social. They were also very much influenced by the natural characteristics of the region, not only the purely geographic, but also climatic and other characteristics. The ratio between the size of natural territories and population density, and the diversity of wildlife played an important role, too.

The Far Eastern region in question called the Lower Amur is quite vast. It includes the greater parts of the modern Khabarovsk and Maritime Territories (*Krais*) located on the lower stretches of the Amur River (the distance from the estuary of the Ussuri River to the estuary of the Amur River is one thousand kilometers) and encompassing all its major and minor tributaries and lakes. Apart from the population of that area, this presentation takes into account the indigenous population along the rivers flowing into the Tatar Strait and the Sea of Japan, because those peoples are close in origin and culture.

The indigenous inhabitants of this vast region are the Nanai of the Tungus language group (according to the census of 1987 and 1989 – 5,400 and 12,063 persons), Ulchi (1,400 and 3,730), Negidal (423 and 622 persons), Orochi and Udegei (2,400 persons - 1989: Orochi - 915, Udegei - 2,011), Sakhalin Orok (about 750 persons; 1989 - 391 person), and the Nivkhi of the Amur and Sakhalin with their different language (4,600 – 4,600). There were no other non-indigenous newcomers in the entire territory (with the exception of small Evenk groups appearing periodically in different locations).

According to archeological data, the ancestors of modern indigenous peoples have

© Copyright 2001 - A.V. Smolyak

lived in the territory for many thousands of years in small groups since the late Stone Age. They came from the South, from the West and later from the North. Scientists have discovered various relics in the cultures and especially in the languages of those peoples showing that in the past the connections were mostly with the North West (Turk, Mongolian, Tungus, Manchurian and other languages). According to the archeological data, there have never been any major ethnic formations inhabiting the whole territory (Okladnikov 1970, 1971; Derevianko and Okladnikov 1983). According to the data of 1897, the total population of the Lower Amur area was fifteen thousand persons (Patkanov 1912: Vol. XI, Iss. 3). Russians came to the territory in the 1850s.

Destiny has sent the indigenous hunters and fishermen the richest gifts of the rivers and taiga: more than 130 species of fish could be found in the Amur River and lakes. One kind was vitally important not only for their food, but also for their way of life. This was the salmon coming briefly from the sea along the Amur in summer and in winter. Every family tried to catch enough of the fish to last a year. They dried it, especially for winter, because, while they practiced ice fishing, this was difficult and unreliable. When they prepared dried salmon (called *yukola*) a lot of waste was left, but that waste was also dried and used as feed for sledge dogs. Every family had from nine to eleven dogs. Aboriginals used fish skin to make clothing, footwear, sails and many other things.

The second richest resource for aboriginal life was game. They used the meat and skins of the large animals which they hunted (such as moose, Manchurian deer, deer, and bears) for food and clothing. Small animal pelts (sable, squirrel, fox) were taken by different merchants (mostly Manchurian) in exchange for goods such as metal, tools, cloths, flour and jewellery.

The small population and rich resources of the area could give the impression that people lived without any care in the world. But nature required a lot of work, and persistence in overcoming many difficulties and even dangers. Life was especially difficult in winter when all the waters were covered with meters of ice and were inaccessible to the unskilled. The solution was to copy the methods of their predecessors.

These Northern peoples were formed from various ethnic sources which intermingled for many centuries. Many studies have established that these nations, including even the smallest consisting of fewer than one thousand, kept their own distinctive features in folklore and cultural details, though the latter acquired many common features as a result of the long and close contacts between the nations. The Lower Amur area saw the establishment of a unified economic and cultural community: the closeness of the nations became evident in the type of houses, clothing, transportation, fishing and

hunting tools and, to a lesser degree, in spiritual culture.

Development was slow in these areas. The nations found in that region in the nineteenth century had already lived there in the seventeenth century. Their numbers and distribution along the Amur River were similar in both centuries (Dolguikh 1960: Vol. 55). Russian researchers of the 19th and 20th centuries found boundaries between them, but gradually it was established that these boundaries were not clearly delineated and that in most cases the 'border' villages were inhabited by ethnically mixed populations. Ethnically mixed marriages were noted by researchers as far back as in the 1850s (Shrenk 1883-1903; Nevelskoy 1947). Population 'mixing' has been going on for a long time and has been inevitable, but every one of the nations has preserved its specific features, including its self-consciousness, to the present. Nevertheless that 'mixing' has been so profound that it is revealed during the study of almost every clan's origin.

All aboriginals living along the Lower Amur were settled and used winter houses in their villages. Predominantly, the villages were small, consisting of 3 to 4 houses. Large villages were very few and found mostly near the Amur estuary where the Nivkhi lived. In 1897 out of the three hundred villages along the Amur River small villages in some areas accounted for 70-80% of the total number. According to the records, some villages remained in the same place for decades. But very often within a period of 10 - 15 years some villages disappeared, to be replaced by others (Smolyak 1982: 226-229). It has been established that the main reason for the disappearance of villages were floods. These occurred mostly on small rivers, and two or three times during a season. Along the Amur floods were less frequent, occurring three times a year average, but they were disastrous for the population and influenced the destinies of many families. The severest Amur floods, occurring in 1915 and 1968, were remembered by the Ulchi and Nanai for many decades, because they radically changed the lives of their families: many saw leaving the place as the only way out.

The second reason why people left their villages were epidemics, such as smallpox, plague and flu, which occurred frequently in the 19th century and earlier. They killed many families while others, having already suffered or fearing imminent disaster, escaped. Families loaded their children, dogs and household items onto boats or rafts and sailed down the river to look for help and a different life.

All such events were reflected in legends based on memories. The other reasons for population movement were cases of poor salmon catches, when a family found itself unable to accumulate a sufficient supply for winter and so threatened with starvation. Different people reacted to this extreme situation differently: some relied on their own abilities, others escaped down the river where there was more fish. Nanai who

TRADITIONAL PRINCIPLES OF NATURAL RESOURCE USE

A.V. Smolyak

escaped usually stayed in Ulchi or Nivkhi villages. There was a custom that was recorded in memory and legends to receive hospitably any people who sought refuge. These customs were observed by L. Ya. Shternberg who lived among the Nivkhi for a long time. Migrants were always invited to stay when local people saw boats loaded with children and gear. They were assisted in building houses and later marriages occurred. In this way members of the small-numbered peoples of the Amur frequently settled in the territories of other ethnic groups.

Long distance migrations also had other 'private' reasons. Younger, more mobile hunters liked to travel long distances, sometimes hundreds of kilometers, to new places which enriched their education and sometimes resulted in individual migration. Sometimes hunters 'discovered' better fishing areas, and migrations ensued.

The winter houses of the Amur hunters and fishermen looked alike from a distance. Built on a frame, they were one-room structures with gable roofs and *kan* (Korean furnace) heating. Around the houses there were usually auxiliary structures such as barns and fish drying sheds. In some Ulchi, Nivkhi and Nanai villages there were summer sheds, either built on piles or in the form of tree bark gable roof houses.

Every winter house accommodated from two to four families. Each family had its own part of the *kan* and a hearth. The *kan* space was used for eating, sleeping and household work. Each family had a barn on piles where they kept clothes, food and hunting and fishing tools. Sometimes there were special barns for the tools. A family also owned other structures such as fish drying sheds, means of transport such as boats, sledges and skis, and dogs (both sledge and hunting). So a family was an independent economic unit.

Very often the families sharing a house were not related. The custom of the sharing of one winter house by several families can be considered as a way of overcoming difficulties and adapting to the way of life of the local household. In late fall every year all able-bodied men left for the taiga to hunt fur bearing animals until spring. Only women and children were left in the winter houses. During long and severe winters it was difficult for a single family to survive if a person fell ill or a baby was born. Sometimes the temperatures were so low that it took the efforts of several women just to keep the house warm. So it became the custom for several families to live together and help one another. Very few persons lived in small villages and every person was especially valued.

As soon as the hunters came back from the taiga in spring, families moved separately to small rivers and lakes and engaged in fishing and gathering, but they moved back to winter houses when the salmon came. Some peoples had permanent summer camps, others changed locations several times according to the results of spring

fishing.

The Lower Amur indigenous peoples formed neighborhood communes uniting all residents of every village irrespective of the village size. The commune did not have any fixed territory. All the houses were built along river banks, leaving space open on both sides for any new settlers. The Amur and its tributaries were like the sea and villages were located 20-40 kilometers apart. There were enough fishing grounds for every village and the small population could not exhaust all the resources. The hunting grounds were also vast, stretching for hundreds of kilometers around every village. Every family fished and hunted independently with no commune participation.

Communes were not prominent institutions and were not 'headed' by any person, but they influenced the lives of all residents very significantly because everybody wanted the same – a quiet and prosperous life without stress and disasters. Public opinion was important for every family and person. If a family was poor, it received necessary help - mutual assistance was the key principle allowing survival in the most difficult situations. All village residents took care of single and old persons, widows with children and such persons. Communes supervised the observance of traditions and customs.

Mutual help was common among all village residents: men never went hunting alone, and they formed groups to build salmon traps, boats and houses. In summer and autumn groups of men and women went to the taiga to pick berries. Very often necessary help was given not only inside a commune, but also to neighboring villages, which might be located 30-40 kilometers away, especially small villages in distress.

Every commune included families belonging to different clans. The materials of the 1897 census show this very clearly: among the three hundred villages (Nanai, Ulchi, Nivkhi) studied, even although some of those villages were small, not a single one consisted of families of only one clan. Fully the same situation was observed in Udegei, Orochi and Negidal villages. This contradicts the conclusions of many authors who have claimed that Northern small-numbered peoples used to live in clans.

Apart from the families belonging to different clans but to the main people inhabiting a territory, many villages had families of other ethnic groups. Such families were few in Nanai villages, more numerous in Ulchi villages, and the most numerous (sometimes amounting to more than 50%) in the Nivkhi villages located along the lower stretches of the Amur River.

Many village residents of different clans and ethnic groups intermarried. All those

TRADITIONAL PRINCIPLES OF NATURAL RESOURCE USE

A.V. Smolyak

peoples, the Nanai, Ulchi, Negidal, had a custom called *doha* or *douha*, by which several clans could be made to be related, a chain of related clans including two, three or more clans. When clans became 'related' then, among other customs, they observed an exogamy ban. The purpose of creating such 'clan alliances' was to establish close and friendly relations, and so to strengthen ties, a process which was mostly needed by old clans that had suffered from epidemics or other disasters. Often in such alliances families were also strengthened, because members of *doha* or *douha* married widows with children.

Inside communes marriages were natural and cemented the communes, making them and public opinion more effective. A big role there belonged to women. One can say that public opinion directed the whole life of a commune, because nobody was left uninfluenced.

If possible conflicts within communes were resolved with the help of the most authoritative elders. If a matter was too serious for this, a known judge was invited from the same ethnic group but from a distant clan. Only men were present at the hearing of the case, but women gave their thoughts beforehand at a 'family council' so that men could take into account all the factors. One possible sentence was for the person to leave the commune, which meant losing ties with close people. A commune was universally valued and very few people left it of their own free will.

All the historical literature has tied all aspects of the public life of the Amur peoples (like of the majority of Northern peoples) with the clans, which have been considered to be the backbone of life. Unfortunately, no authors who have previously written about the peoples of the region have analyzed their life conditions influencing the social aspects. Many authors wrote about clans inside the peoples in question. The best details were given by L.Ya. Shternberg who lived among Nivkhi and other ethnic groups for eight years at the turn of the 19th century. He was the first to study Nivkhi clans down to the minutest detail. There are very important conclusions to be drawn from his work: among those peoples, a clan had authority over marital relations, religious beliefs, and related matters. He strongly denied that clans had economic functions or held their own fixed territories (and he repeatedly emphasized that clans did not own clan lands) (Shternberg 1933).

At the beginning of the 20th century many historians and ethnographers took great interest in the works of L. Morgan and F. Engels on the social structures of peoples of North America, Australia and other continents. These were remote from Siberia and the Lower Amur, but these students thought they had found many similarities with the clan structures of those nations. L.Ya. Shternberg did not see these, having described only what he had observed personally for a long time. In the foreword to L.Ya. Shternberg's book published posthumously he was criticized for 'not noticing'

the economic functions of the clan (Al'kor (Koshkin) 1933). This opinion (concerning 'clan lands of a clan') was repeated by many authors during the 1930s, 1970s and later (Zolotarev 1933, 1939; Lipinskaya 1956; Kreinovich 1936, 1973; Taksami 1967, 1975). They wrote about stable, fixed clan territories that remained intact till the mid-twentieth century (for example, in remote areas of Sakhalin), and asserted: "Parts of clan territories were inherited, and the owners defended them against invasion".

Authors who wrote this disregarded the fact that in the 19th century and earlier the clans of all the Amur nations had lived dispersed in separate small groups in dozens of villages. And if a father and a son used the same fishing grounds, this was not the land of the clan, but the land of a family. L.Ya. Shternberg's data on the dispersed settlement of Nivkhi clans were similar along the entire Lower Amur, as was confirmed by the 1897 census. Every village of every Amur ethnic group represented a conglomeration of clans. Large Nanai and Nivkhi villages had families representing from two to eight clans.

The conditions of life along the Lower Amur caused clans to break into separate small groups or 'branches'. Unstable life conditions caused population migrations for the reasons mentioned above. The small groups of migrants, finding themselves in a strange environment, joined other small or big groups in order to consolidate their positions and survive. As a result, among Nivkhi, Ulchi and other peoples clans included ethnic elements of different origin. L.Ya. Shternberg observed this among Nivkhi clans, and it turned out that this phenomenon, disregarded by some scientists, was common for all Amur peoples.¹

Authors of the 1920s, 1930s and 1970s do not accept L.Ya. Shternberg's data on Amur peoples, though they use later information. They also ignore the data of L.I. Shrenk (1883-1903) and other data going back to the mid-eighteenth century, that confirms the fact that those ethnic groups did not divide hunting and fishing grounds. L.I. Shrenk explained this by the sparseness of the population ("The Lower Amur is

¹ The old idea of the 'Marxist classics' about a clan as an economic unit was extrapolated to people such as the Udegei. A book about them says that among this small taiga people inhabiting a vast territory "clans from time immemorial owned hunting and fishing grounds" (Krushanov 1989: 60). Such a division of hunting and fishing grounds appears to be strange, the more so as in 1897 that people lived in villages consisting of two or three tree branch huts separated by dozens or hundreds of kilometers. V.K. Arseniev wrote: "These people do not know how to divide land or air". It is also known that the rivers along which that people lived had major floods two or three times a year. So where would have been the sense in dividing territories into clan lands?

TRADITIONAL PRINCIPLES OF NATURAL RESOURCE USE

A.V. Smolyak

an uninhabited desert”) and the vast extent of the territory.

Our literature assigned a social function to clans living along the Amur which was erroneous. Clan members lived in villages, or territorial communes, but clans and communes had different functions. A clan regulated marital relations among people and the observance of religious traditions and customs. Neither clans nor communes dealt with hunting and fishing grounds which were used freely by everybody. Some changes in this respect appeared in the early twentieth century with the influx of migrants. But the old traditions, established as a result of the unstable river flow, of floods causing changes in salmon migration routes and places of human settlement which made people look for new fishing grounds, continued for a long time, along with the belief that success in fishing and hunting depended on the will of gods. These gave rise to the attitudes to bag and catch which led them always to be shared with others. According to L.I. Shrenk, hunters from any ethnic groups could hunt freely in the vicinity of Nanai or Nivkhi villages (Shrenk 1883-1903: II, 117, 118, 120, 212, 218, 223, etc.; see also Merkushev n.d.: 193, 24, 26, etc.; Smolyak 1975: 157-168). During the 20th century the fishing grounds of the Nanai and Ulchi were frequented by fishermen from neighboring and remote areas. The bagged sea animals were shared with all village residents. ‘Bag and catch are gifts of God’, it was said. These customs and beliefs lived among those peoples until the middle of the 20th century.

Migration caused by various unfavorable situations in that region was usual even long ago. There was settlement among other peoples, inter-ethnic marriages, assimilation processes, the inclusion of new branches into local clans, connections with old relatives, and joint festivities (for example, the Bear festival among the Ulchi, Orochi, Nivkhi and Orok). But gradually the ties of migrants with old relatives weakened, at a rate and in a manner depending on circumstances, since all those processes were different. As a result, certain local clans died out and others grew in numbers, but most clans in their composition had additional ethnic branches indistinguishable from the original clans. As was mentioned above, the ethnic composition along the Lower Amur was fairly uniform during the 17th and 19th centuries. This gives grounds to believe that the processes characteristic of the 19th century date back further than the 17th century.

Mixed marriages contributed to group survival, especially of small-numbered peoples, such as the Orochi, Orok and Negidal. Mixed marriages with Russians became common during the post-war period (after 1945) with the influx of migrants representing other ethnic groups, and with urban development. Significant changes in aboriginal life began when Russians settled on the Amur River in the mid-nineteenth century. More changes came during the 1930s in connection with the establishment of collective farms. In the beginning there were just separate attempts to convert the

aboriginals to peasantry and the Christian orthodox religion. Radical changes in life, culture and economy date back to the 1930s when a national intelligentsia emerged and universal education was initiated. The material and spiritual cultures were changing, but certain features of the old life style remained: the principles of exogamy were stable and their violations were rare during 1960-1970.

Some old customs were also preserved, such as the giving of assistance to the needy. And that was despite the tremendous growth of the population in the region where today indigenous people account for only 10% of the population, if that. Many towns and cities have emerged that attract young people (over 20% leave their villages for towns). Young people prefer to be employed in industry rather than in the old traditional economies. Every indigenous person has a high school education. Among the national intelligentsia there are writers, scientists, doctors and teachers. At present many of them are members of different organizations engaged in building modern culture, society and economy. Moscow central organizations and their regional branches are looking for new forms of indigenous peoples' social development. More and more often there appear projects which aim to 'go back to old ways', which usually means the 'revival' of clan communes and re-establishment of 'clan territories'. Usually the authors of such projects refer to the very sparse literature describing these old institutions in certain regions.

Previously such institutions emerged in different Northern regions and on certain 'foundations' under the influence of specific local conditions, which might be geographic, climatic or historical. This paper has attempted to show the nature of those conditions for one Far Eastern region. In that area social life was founded on territorial neighbor communes existing alongside clans, and has argued that the completely different functions of those institutions never crossed. Today, it is in fashion to use the term 'clan commune'. In that region clan communes never existed, for, according to the 1897 census, there was not a single clan commune among the three hundred native villages registered in the territory. They could not appear because not a single clan out of many was 'independent' in the sense of having its own territory. Accordingly, there were no 'clan hunting and fishing grounds'. On the other hand, universally used hunting and fishing grounds are often mentioned in the 19th century literature which is virtually unknown now.

References

TRADITIONAL PRINCIPLES OF NATURAL RESOURCE USE

A.V. Smolyak

- AL'KOR (KOSHKIN), Ya.P.
1933 'Foreward'. In L.Ya. Shternberg, *Ghiliak, Gol'd, Orochi, Negidal*. Khabarovsk.
- DEREVIANKO, A.P., and A.P. OKLADNIKOV
1983 *Long Past of Priamurie and Primorie*. Novosibirsk.
- DOLGUIKH, B.O.
1960 *Clan and Tribe Composition Of Siberian Nations in the 17th century*. Moscow: Tyumen Institute of Ethnography.
- KREINOVICH, E.A.
1936 *Vestiges of Clan Ownership and Group Marriages among Ghiliak: Problems of Pre-Class Society History*. Moscow-Leningrad
1973 *Nivkh'gu*. Moscow
- KRUSHANOV, A.I. (ed.)
1989 *Udegei History and Culture*. Leningrad: Institute of Far Eastern Nations.
- LIPINSKAYA, N.A.
1956 *Nanai. Peoples of Siberia*. Moscow-Leningrad
- MERKUSHEV, V.V.
n.d. 'Statistical Study of Sakhalin Aborigines.' In Sakhalin, *Collected Works*
- NEVELSKOY, G.I.
1947 *Heroic Deeds of Russian Naval Officers in the Far North of Russia*. Moscow.
- OKLADNIKOV. A.P.
1970 *Late Stone Age in Siberia and Far East*. Moscow.
1971 *Petroglyphs of the Lower Amur*. Leningrad.
- PATKANOV. S.K.
1912 *Statistics on the Tribes in Siberia*. Western RGO on Statistics Division.
- SHRENK. L.I.
1883-1903 *Indigenous Peoples of the Amur Area*, Vols. 1 (1883), II (1899), III (1903). Saint Petersburg.
- SHTERNBERG, L. Ya.
1933 *Ghiliak, Gol'd, Orochi, Negidal*. Khabarovsk.
- SMOLYAK, A.V.
1975 *Concerning Freely Used Hunting and Fishing Grounds. Ethnic Processes among the Lower Amur and Sakhalin Peoples*. Moscow.
1982 *Nations of the Lower Amur and Sakhalin. Ethnic History of Northern Peoples*. Moscow.
- TAKSAMI, Ch.M.

- 1967 *Nivkhi*. Leningrad
1975 *Basic Problems of Nivkhi's Ethnography and History*. Leningrad.
ZOLOTAREV, A.M.
1933 'Vestiges of Clan Structures among Ghiliak of the Chome District.'
 The Soviet North: 2.
1939 *Clan Structures and Religion of Ulchi*. Khabarovsk.