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# Collective Clan Disease among the Nanay

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**ABSTRACT** According to Nanay emic ideas, shamanic disease, which affects a shaman in the period of his or her formation, also affects his or her relatives, who begin to suffer from nervous disorders and other problems but recover at their new shaman's incarnation. A similar spiritual correlation within the group of relatives becomes apparent also when a shaman is involved in a situation which connects him or her with the spiritual world (murder, death, incest, etc.), so that the consequences of such events influence not only the shaman, but also his or her kin.

From the emic perspective, relations with the spirits have not only spiritual, but also biological components (emerging for instance, in the idea about the possibility of human-spiritual cohabitation), which opens up possibilities for spirituality to be inherited by descendants. These circumstances suggest that the social factors that unite the clan (exogamy etc.), are secondary to the religious factors, and probably used as a means to adapt to the spiritual problems that shamanists face. Running the danger of collective clan disease, people have to remember their clan peculiarity and exclusiveness and undertake common efforts for its avoidance. Being aware of their patrilineal descent and of their own place in it, people can define the circle of possible persons who are subject to similar mental and other troubles and who should look together for the means of a cure. The wish to ensure spiritual security results in the social prescriptions and taboos that form the patrilineal clan.<sup>1</sup>

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Clan relationships and clan beliefs are still topical for the Nanay elders who have been my informants for a long time. They have lost most of their traditional culture. Their clans have neither territorial nor eco-

conomic unity any more, but they remember their clan descent, in some cases in connection with shamanic or non-shamanic spiritual practice, which helps them to explain much of human contacts with the world of spirits. The native understanding of social and religious aspects of clan relationships differs considerably from accepted scholarly ideas in Russian ethnology. Following some of their foreign colleagues, Russian researchers consider that the social basis of clanship is primary and clan religious ideas are needed only to mark and emphasize this basis.<sup>2</sup> To explain, for example, the prevalence of unilineal descent and the division of relatives into agnates and cognates, researchers call attention to some social advantages of this classification of relatives.<sup>3</sup> From their viewpoint, the advantages consist of the fact that because of unilineal descent, each member of the group gets a clear idea of who of his or her relatives belong to his group, and to whom he or she is connected with mutual aid duty. From this perspective, ideas about common spirits belonging to a certain lineage (totemic name and so on), are only needed to identify the members of the group and to consolidate those agnates who live far apart from each other. In other words, from this perspective, religious principles are secondary and derive from social principles.

The bearers of Nanay tradition adhere to a different opinion. They believe that it is the religious needs and problems which are primary and most important. From their viewpoint, social clan rules of behaviour do not originate from the necessity to distribute rights and duties among the relatives, but are merely a means to adapt to the fact that clan spirits (*sewens*, *ambans* and others) influence the group of agnates in the same way. It is mainly common spiritual problems that force them to unite into lineages and clans to be able to resist the negative spiritual influence (or to use the benefits of dependence on their clan spirits) together.

This perspective, which so far has been very much neglected in research, can be revealed as a result of an emic approach. The emic approach here is based on research into material recorded from the informants in their native language and on the ideas elaborated by the bearers of the tradition themselves. This helps us to see the phenomena studied in the light of the native people's understanding. But the advantages of an emic approach are nevertheless limited. The Nanay way of describing the phenomenon is not the same thing as the phenomenon itself, it is just their interpretation of it. It is this interpretation that I try to describe, however: not the fact itself, but how the natives understand it is my object here.

Even so, the Nanay mostly relate concrete facts and situations and do not summarize the abstract concepts that correspond to them. They do not have, for example, a word for 'clan disease,' which I introduce here, or even for such

a well-known phenomenon as 'shamanic disease.' Formulating abstract concepts, I have had to step back from the emic approach, and my concern was only that any abstract idea should be derived from and based on my informants' ideas and as often as possible verified with them in additional field work.

### Collective Shamanic Clan Disease. Acute Condition

Collective shamanic disease, which affects a group of clanspeople among the Evenks,<sup>4</sup> was first described by the Russian scholar Sergey M. Shirokogorov. According to his description, the symptoms of the disease are the following:

Some of the young men would lose normal sleep, would sit on their beds, speak and sing in half-sleeping state. [...] They would be distracted, and absent-minded; they would neglect or miss their work duties and would gradually be completely disabled. Some other clanspeople might run to the rocks or into the forests where they would remain for days without food and some of them would even perish. Others, who are inclined to 'olonism', might become dangerous during momentary uncontrolled states; they might throw various utensils, burning wood or hot water. [...] Other clanspeople would have 'nervous attacks' at moments of great responsibility, e.g. during the crossing of rivers, holding children, handling hot water and fire. Accident after accident would follow and several people might perish. This would be a case of a real mass psychosis which might put the clan into a state of complete social and economic paralysis threatening the very existence of the clan (Shirokogoroff 1999: 264).

In another book he describes the symptoms of the collective disease in this way: "People might become nervous, commit acts of inexplicable rudeness and even crimes. Common irritation and inclination to hysterical fits spread and the death-rate increases" (Shirokogorov 1919: 44; transl. T. B.). According to Shirokogorov, when the disease attacks the entire clan, the normal life of that clan ends which has fatal consequences for the clan's existence. The consequences of clan disease consist in malnourishment, decrease of the birth rate, and increase of the death rate (Shirokogorov 1919: 61). The collective disease can develop to such an extent that the entire clan, as Shirokogorov writes, may risk death. All the proceedings of normal clan life are interrupted, sometimes for a long time; and this condition may last for several years (Shirokogorov 1919: 44).

Siberian people's susceptibility to different mental and nervous illnesses, to periodical mass hysteria, to mass visual and acoustic hallucinations and to depression had repeatedly been noticed by other scholars.<sup>5</sup> What was new in Shirokogorov's writings was that he was the first to notice that the mass disease embraces not any group of people, but the kinship group of

the patrilineal clan. My own field material was collected among the Nanay, a people of the Tungus-Manchurian group related to the Evenks.<sup>6</sup> It confirms that the collective disease usually attacks a consanguineous patrilineal group including all the men sharing a common male ancestor, as well as the women born within that patrilineal group, that is, the men's sisters and daughters married to members of other clans. The group subject to collective disease usually excludes women taken as wives from the other clans. But in some cases, the married women, especially those who have some shaman-like abilities, may also suffer from collective disease in their husbands' clans in addition to being affected by spiritual troubles in their fathers' clan. As a result, they remain in an in-between position between the two clans, although women's dependence on their fathers' clan's spirituality is considered to be much stronger.<sup>7</sup> My informants told me that as a rule a woman-shaman travels in her shamanic trips along her father's clan's invisible spiritual 'roads.' She has access to her husband's shamanic spirits only in some exclusive situations, for example, if she secretly steals them from her husband or if her husband lends them to her of his own accord.

Shirokogorov was not only the first to show that the Evenks who suffer from collective hysteria belong to the same kinship group. He was also the first to point out the connection between the mass mental illnesses and the emergence of a new clan shaman. He drew attention to the connection between the individual call for shamanic practice and the mass mental diseases and even mass failures of business, which strike the whole group of the neophyte-shaman's relatives (Shirokogorov 1919: 48). The collective disease symptoms cited from Shirokogorov above are the typical symptoms of shamanic initiation disease. The only specificity is that not only a neophyte has them, but also several of his or her clanspeople. Not only are these symptoms typical of shamanic disease, but the situation when they appear also reveals their shamanic nature. The collective clan disease emerges when the clan is without a shaman, and continues during the entire initiation period of a new shaman. "Terrible inexplicable disease appears when the clan is without a shaman, that is, after the previous shaman's death and before the initiation of the next shaman" (Shirokogorov 1919: 43; transl. T. B.). Shirokogorov describes a case where there were two candidates for shamanship within a clan, and only one of them could eventually become the clan shaman. Both candidates suffered from shamanic disease, but, as Shirokogorov writes:

At the same time there were also fits among the other members of the clan, and misfortune, in business and in private life, struck the members of the entire clan. The common opinion of the clanspeople inclined to the idea that a shaman was really needed (Shirokogorov 1919: 45; transl. T. B.).

If none of the sufferers became a shaman, the disease among the clan intensified, exhibited new modifications and spread, embracing more and more clanspeople (Shirokogorov 1919: 61). Another argument supporting the idea that collective clan disease may be of a shamanic nature is that, understood from the emic perspective, it is caused by spirits which, having been released after the clan shaman's death, try to find a new 'master':

Looking for a new 'master' among the clanspeople, urging them to sacrifices or trying merely to draw the clanspeople's attention to themselves, maybe even revenging themselves, the clan spirits prevent the clanspeople from earning their living in the hunt; as a result, mass failures of business threaten the clan with starvation and mortal danger. (Shirokogorov 1919: 48; transl. T. B.).

The collective disease should be also called *shamanic* since it can only be cured by setting up a new shaman.

The fact that not only a man, but also a woman can become a shaman and can pass her father's clan's spirits to, for instance, her son complicates the spiritual situation of the clan since not only paternal but also maternal clan spirits can influence the clanspeople. It does not abolish the domination of paternal clan spirits and of patrilineal descent, however (Smolyak 1991: 35). Firstly, patrilineal descent prevails; secondly, matrilineal descent often joins the main patrilineal one. However, women's participation in shamanizing breaks the spiritual homogeneity of the clan and complicates the measures of spiritual security against collective clan disease. Different Siberian indigenous peoples guarded against this in different ways. Thus, in the past, Buryat parents, as Matvey Khangalov wrote, killed their daughters and brothers killed their sisters in order to retain shamanic inheritance within the paternal line (Khangalov 2004: 126). Tungus-Manchurian and other indigenous peoples permitted female shamanism, but to secure against its possible negative consequences they used the double or threefold clan exogamic system, which is based on the mutual exchange of women between two or three clans. I suppose that such a system helped them to limit the number of spirits that may influence people of the clans involved and make it easier to manage them.

It is important to highlight the fact that not only the disease itself, but also recovery from it are collective in nature. The group hysteria can only be cured if the spirits choose one of the affected people and make him or her a shaman (Shirokogorov 1919: 43). As soon as one of the afflicted becomes a shaman she or he recovers, together with all the rest of the clanspeople. In the clan, as Shirokogorov writes, the illness ceases simultaneously at the moment when the spirits enter one of the clan members. Thus the shaman is,

one might say, a safety valve which alleviates the mental illness of the whole clan (Shirokogorov 1919: 61). Seen from the emic perspective, this synchronous convalescence of all the sick clanspeople is the result of the spirits having achieved their object by moving into one of them.

### Collective Shamanic Clan Disease. Chronic Condition

Shamanic disease precedes shamanic initiation and is considered to leave the neophyte right after he or she has been initiated as a shaman. My field material however shows that the state of being a full-fledged shaman can hardly be determined as a state of enjoying full health as well. It would be more correct to assert that shamanic disease as such remains, only changed from an acute condition into a chronic one and with exacerbation transformed to remission. The dependence on the spirits continues to keep the shaman in the peculiar world of night- and day-dreams and visions. It makes him or her especially vulnerable and predisposed to a relapse, which can be caused by mistakes in ritual practice, careless words or the spirits' own groundless temporary disinclination towards their master. "If a shaman was to say something wrong in his ritual or if his patient would not keep the promise to sacrifice [the shamanic spirit] would send disease back to him," says my informant Pyotr. "If you mistakenly said even one or two wrong words," the shamaness Lidiya says, "you will die. I am not able to talk a lot. I can let any number of words go out of my mouth, but if some of them are wrong, I will die." She confesses that sometimes it is not easy to please the spirits in order to remain safe from the shamanic disease. "However hard a shaman might try, whatever he might do, if he will say something or sit silently; in any case he will fall ill." People become shamans to get a release from the torture of shamanic disease. Shamanic initiation indeed relieves the shaman's suffering, but it is not necessarily a case of complete recovery. "When people become shamans, do they really want to die?" the shaman Lidiya asks. "On the contrary, they hope to live for a long time, but sometimes it does not turn out like that. Someone has become a shaman, but in spite of that (in spite of recovery) he may not even be able to live." She gives as an example women belonging to the Soyan lineage of the Beldy clan and asserts that not one of them survived after they had become shamans.

All of them died. They died young because they became shamans. They died despite the fact that they were young. What is that? What a *sewen* is that? It is a *sewen* which crushes people! It is a *sewen* which murders people! Such a being! I do not know how to live!<sup>8</sup>

Lidiya is not of the Soyan lineage, and became a shaman long ago, so according to widespread opinion she must be healthy and completely free of

shamanic disease, but actually this is not the case. Telling me about one of her spirit-helpers, she says:

She [the *sewen*] torments me. They are such creatures on my shamanic road, which constantly torment me. I must overcome her (the *sewen's*) obstinacy and drown out her voice. All the time she begs for food and torments me. I cannot find the proper food to feed her. They [the *sewens*] cannot find any food at my place and leave me. I feel as if someone has been hitting me with a stick, I am not able to do anything. I am like a piece of wood with a hammer beating against me. Such a person I became. I am not capable of anything.

Some of the full-fledged shamans have plenty of problems with their *sewens*, others encounter fewer troubles. Their dependence on the spirits and the possible recurrence of shamanic disease does not completely leave them after the initiation, although the disease is transformed into a remission state. The dependence on spirits lasts, however, and produces special dreams and abilities and sometimes (especially in a shaman's old age) it may exacerbate the disease in new ways. The same changes may affect the entire clan. A time of crisis, when the clan does not have a shaman, leads to an acute condition of the collective disease. But even at a more peaceful time, when the clan has received its shaman, the clan's condition can hardly be described as one of perfect health and wellbeing. It is rather a regressive, remissive stage of the same chronic ailment with temporarily slowed-down symptoms. The collective convalescence is only the lull. The clan remains dependent on its clan spirits and exists as if within a common spiritual 'electric field.' The clan spirits influence both the clan shaman and the ordinary clanspeople, although in different ways. The relationship between a shaman and his spirits is active and in certain periods of his life the shaman is able to possess and rule his spirits. The ordinary clanspeople, on the other hand, are passive and submissive in relation to the same spirits. They experience their pressure, but have only limited influence on them.

This passive nature of their dependence on the spirits becomes apparent in dreams and visions. It is considered that through their dreams and visions clanspeople can visit the same space of the invisible spiritual world, they can watch the same phenomena there and even meet each other. Yefrosiniya, for example, told me about a dream she had that was also shared by some of her relatives on her husband's side. The day before the dream Yefrosiniya visited the funeral of her aunt on her mother's side who was a shaman. From the funeral she brought home a photograph and some rags. That very night, after she returned home, she dreamt that she was searching for something in a box of photos. There was also an old man, her hus-



band's paternal grandfather, whom she regularly has been dreaming about since she was married. Her husband's grandfather was standing near her in her dream, watching all her movements. Yefrosiniya also dreamt about her husband who was also there looking at her angrily. "I was wondering," says Yefrosiniya, "why he was looking so angrily at me and what I was doing wrong." Then in her dream, Yefrosiniya found the photograph that she had brought home from the funeral. The moment when she finally found the photograph, the departed shaman-woman (who had been interred at the funeral) came into the room singing and dancing in a shamanic way. "She passed by me over there," said Yefrosiniya and pointed at the corner of her room where, as she said, the shaman-woman was dancing in her dream. "She passed by me and stayed over there as if she was begging for something." At the end of her vision, Yefrosiniya dreamt that Mariya (her husband's aunt, who was staying in another room) also came into her room, stood motionless and watched the shaman. As soon as the shaman left her room, Yefrosiniya woke up and turned on the light. That very moment Mariya indeed came into her room with the words: "What have you brought here from the funeral? What did you pick up there? The [departed] woman is shamanizing round the house. She is begging for something!" "Ouch! I answered, [said Yefrosiniya], I have picked up a photograph and some rags there!" Yefrosiniya believes that the departed shaman came to her home looking for the photograph she took away from her place. "She was probably searching for the photograph," says Yefrosiniya.

Then I told her: 'A-a!' I said, I said it aloud: 'Aunt, I said, in the morning I will get up and give it back to you!' In the morning I got up and threw everything away. 'Have your possession!' I called to her. 'Have it!' And I threw away [the photograph and the rags]. I threw them over there, into the ravine! That was all! Since then nothing happened any more! Nobody came to me again to beg for that photograph

Yefrosiniya affirms that both her husband, who slept in the same room, and Mariya, her husband's aunt (his father's sister), who spent the night in another room, had the same dream as she did. "An outsider would not be able to see it," Yefrosiniya says. "Mariya does not live in our house, but she is my husband's relative." That is why, as Yefrosiniya interprets it, she was among those who shared the same night vision.

Yefrosiniya is not a shaman, but she has some shaman-like abilities which make her sensitive to both her father's and her husband's clan spirituality. In other dreams she penetrates the spiritual space of her original clan. For instance, before marriage, she and two of her sisters dreamt about a tiger that was believed to be their fourth unmarried sister Zoya's spirit-





Zinaida Nikolaevna Beldy in her wedding dress. There are clan trees on the skirt of the dress and birds representing the clanspeople who are not yet born. Under the trees there are tigers, the clan spirits. Photo: Tatiana Bulgakova.

husband and some tiger cubs that were supposed to be Zoya's spirit-children.<sup>9</sup> "All of us dreamt about them," Yefrosiniya says. "We watched them! The tiger was mostly sitting and lying outside, under the window. All of us dreamt that it was outside."

Query: "It was not only Zoya who saw it, but all of you?"

Yefrosiniya: "Yes, all of us saw, that they [her 'husband,' the tiger, and her 'children,' the tiger cubs] approached us and watched us. They were probably interested in how we lived. Maybe they thought we were sick or something! That's most likely why they visited us!"

As all these sisters later acquired some shaman-like abilities (although none of them actually became a shaman), they were able to visit in their dreams both their husbands' clans' and their father's clan's spiritual lands and roads, as they describe it. When Yuliana, one of the sisters, fell ill, the shaman woman Komo healed her. After the séance, the patient's sister Yefrosiniya dreamt that she was looking for Yuliana. At last she found the place where her sick sister was. At the same time Yuliana had a night vision that their sister Vera, whose shaman-like abilities were stronger than hers, came to them and led them out. Vera, for her part, affirmed that she also dreamt about the same event.<sup>10</sup>

The space of dreams (the same spiritual space the shaman is believed to penetrate in his or her ceremonies) is believed to be collective and to belong to the clan, or rather to a certain lineage. Ordinary people enter this space as passive observers (mostly in their night dreams) and have no ability to change anything there. It is only the shaman (or rather his or her spirits) that can operate and act within the spiritual zone.

The clan roads, where people 'travel' in their dreams, are also called the roads of words and tunes. It is believed that the spirits give the people who belong to the same lineage the ability not only to dream similar dreams but also to improvise songs using similar clan melodies. The content of the night visions, on the one hand, and the melodic type of the song improvisations, on the other, can sometimes give people information enough to define exactly to which clan a person belongs. For example, when the future shaman Komo, as a little girl, began to sing in a shaman-like way and tell people about her night dreams, her father began to suspect that she did not belong to his clan and was not his real daughter. Then he made his wife confess that he indeed was not Komo's biological father, because Komo was born as a consequence of incest and her biological father was her mother's brother.

## Collective Clan Disease Caused by a Clan Member's Death

The spiritual unity of the clan manifests itself, as we saw, even in the regular quiet time, when nothing special happens. When some events draw the clanspeople closer to the clan spirits it becomes much more obvious. Such events affecting one of the clanspeople open her or him to the clan's spiritual world, and may harmfully affect the rest of the clan.

One of the obvious situations that bring people closer to the spiritual world is death. The Nanay consider that every person dies because the spirits finally possess her or his soul. In addition, the departed people are themselves believed to become harmful spirits dangerous especially to their clanspeople. The departed ones are supposed to come to their living relatives in dreams and visions to frighten them, to be in the way of their business in order to force them to sacrifice. "After a person dies, he becomes an *amban* [evil spirit]. It is certainly bad! *Amban* will come to frighten somebody" (Marina). The death of each member of the clan is like an additional 'window' to the spiritual world which connects the whole clan to it. The living feel it to a greater or lesser extent, but all are connected to their departed clanspeople. Some of the departed clanspeople can be tamed and used for worship; in this case they become benevolent spirits. Most of them are considered to be dangerous and must be driven away with the help of special rituals. Marina describes one such ritual conducted in order to heal a woman from an illness which was believed to be caused by a departed clansman. "I came when they tried to frighten an *amban*," Marina remembers.

"Now it seems funny of course. But then I was scared to hear it. They frightened the *ambans*! They were the deceased people who were hanging around! One [of the dead persons] even looked in through the window!"

Query: "Were they departed relatives?"

Marina: "Right! They [people, who were in the room] shouted that such and such [a deceased woman] is looking in [from the street] through the window! It was really horrible! They shouted this way! Did they actually see [the deceased woman] or what? But why would they have shouted in vain? Why would they have shouted in vain, that such a woman was looking in through the window? She has become an *amban*. Well, the deceased woman! She has already become an *amban*! Her *panyan* [soul]! It is scared! I covered myself with the blanket. I even sweated! I did not shout myself! Why would I shout? I only listened. They even said the name of the woman [who looked through the window]. She was their relative."

Query: "Do only departed relatives come?"

Marina: "Yes. They also come to be in the way of their business. They come to their clanspeople. [...] Strangers would certainly not come!"

Query: "So, they come to their own?"

Marina: "Right, sure! Their own people are familiar to them."







The shamaness Nura Sergeevna Kile in the village Achan, Khabarovskiy krai.  
Photo: Tatiana Bulgakova.

The maximum closeness to the spiritual world is believed to occur between someone's death and funeral. These days are the most dangerous especially for the closest clanspeople. The shamaness Yelena says that departed people are unsafe for their grandchildren and children. The dead people would not be able to harm strangers or unrelated people; they only crush some of their relatives and take them (their souls) along with them into their graves. The person whose soul is taken away by a dead one is supposed to fall ill and will also die soon. "The departed woman embraces her living husband. The dead man gives a hug to his living wife, to his daughters and sons," Yelena explains. According to the informants' opinion, men are threatened by the dead of his patriclan, but for women, the dead people of both her husband's and her father's clans may be dangerous. "Both my husband's and my father's dead relatives become evil *kochali* and *amban* [evil spirits] for me," Marina explains. But unrelated deceased people surely won't come to me." The shamaness Yelena says that she has first-hand knowledge, having chanced to watch how her departed neighbour tried to take a daughter with her to the grave. Coming to the funeral, Yelena sat on the sofa in the corridor and looked through the open door into the room where the coffin was. "Larisa was her [the departed woman's] youngest daughter," Yelena says.

She [the deceased woman] loved that daughter Larisa... I looked and watched. ... I saw it with my own eyes! The [dead] mother rose up [from her coffin] and was about to catch [Larisa]. I shouted once and [the deceased] fell down back into the coffin. I was sitting in the corridor, when she [the deceased] got up. I uttered a scream, and everybody [those who were present at the funeral] leaped to their feet. I saw it with my open eyes! Well, now it is okay, [Larisa] is still alive. She works in Komsomolsk.

Yelena considers that in her time her own deceased mother also tried to take her away into her grave.

My [deceased] mother embraced me, I watched it in a night dream. [...] After that on the third day, when we went to bury her, they had already hammered the coffin shut and begun to lower it into the grave. I felt that they buried me together with my mother. I once uttered a scream. I screamed! It was unbearable! Then my brother Semyon told me: 'What? Should I open the coffin?' Semyon said. 'Open it!' I answered. They opened it slightly with the axe. Only for such space [about 30 cm]! That is from there ...! I twice uttered a scream and I [my soul] climbed out [of the coffin]. I said: 'Hammer it shut again, I have already gotten out of it!' And they hammered it shut. If I had been an ordinary person [not a shaman] they would have buried me together [with my mother]. [...] We have a lot of cases like that. [The deceased one] embraces the living ones.

The deceased or dying people do not only approach the spiritual world themselves, but also draw their clanspeople closer to it and thereby put them in danger. According to Vladimir K. Arseniev's field data, collected among the Udege, another Tungus-Manchurian people, shortly before someone's death not only the strangers, but even the closest relatives went out of the room and left the dying person alone in order to prevent her or him from looking at the relatives. If they nevertheless stayed in the room, they covered the face of the dying person, who was however still alive, with a towel. The reason was that the dying one should not be able to draw the other people into the beyond by means of his or her gaze (Startsev 2005). The Nanay tried to save living people from their deceased relatives by means of a similar ritual. They tied one end of a thread to the dead person's hand and another end to the hand of one of his or her relatives. Then the shaman uttered a scream and tore the thread. At that very moment the relative would move away without glancing back at the coffin. Then the same action was repeated with each of the relatives present at the funeral. In this way, the living tried to separate themselves from the dead relative.

It was not possible to determine exactly what relatives would be endangered in the case of an ordinary death. It probably does not endanger the whole clan, but only the closest relatives who live in the same home as the departed person. But in the case of an extraordinary death (violent death, attacks by tiger or bear, drowning or death by fire), the entire clan of the dead person was undoubtedly believed to be endangered. Tiger or bear attack was considered to be not just an accident; the spirits are thought to enter these animals and when the spirit-animals attack someone, they mark not only their victim, but the entire clan.

If people are drowned *galigda* or torn by a tiger or a bear, they are believed to be marked by a taiga or water spirit, and fate hangs over their entire clan. People from the other clans cannot borrow hunting and fishing-tackle from this clan (*galigdako gurun*; people with a drowned one) because misfortune will be passed on with these things (Gayer 1991: 109, transl. T. B.).

If they nevertheless took something from the clan where somebody had drowned or been attacked by a tiger or a bear, they would perform a special ritual.

To prevent the negative impact of it [...] they made a toy bow and a small arrow. The person who had borrowed something from the forbidden people should break off, pinch off or cut off a small piece of the borrowed thing and tie it to an arrow. Then he was to shoot the arrow from the bow toward the place where the forbidden people live with the words: 'Go to your owner! Take your entire bad fate away with you!' (Gayer 1991: 109, transl. T. B.).





The clan spirits *diulins*, which are usually placed at home. Photo: Tatiana Bulgakova.

Clan blood revenge may probably also be explained by means of the unit of living and dead clanspeople, forming a collective by sharing the same spiritual invisible space. Evidently blood revenge is needed not to “pacify the soul of the murdered person” and not to “defend the safety of the living people,” as scholars sometimes affirm. It is surely not the manifestation of “a healthy highly developed person of integrity with a whole-hearted religious-social world view, which creates the harmony of personal and public benefit,” as Lev Ya. Shternberg writes (1933: 113, transl. T. B.). It is rather, as the same author asserts in another place, “a burden, weighing upon the clan” (Shternberg 1904: 38, transl. T. B.). The ‘window’ to the spiritual world is opened each time even in connection with a clan member’s ordinary death, but the spiritual world becomes particularly close and dangerous for the clan when somebody is murdered. One clan member’s misfortune can spread to the other clanspeople. Clan spirits become especially close and harmful and

misfortune increases. So after somebody has been murdered, some of his or her clanspeople must also suffer and shed their blood. E. A. Kreinovich, who collected his materials among the Nivkhs, witnessed the following case:

Red blood was squirting from Kurchuk's mouth. The Nivkhs were staying around him as powerless as he was, and kept silent. It was pulmonary bleeding. In the intervals between the coughing fits, Kurchuk repeated: 'It is *takht* that is doing it!' The people who were standing around confirmed: 'That is true! *Takht* is doing that! It is drinking his blood' (Kreinovich 1973: 389, transl. T. B.).

The Nivkhs explained to Kreinovich that in Kurchuk's clan somebody had been murdered, but his clanspeople did not exact any revenge. The spiritual regulation was, however, that "for the murdered victim, the victim's kin should give more blood, because *takht* needs blood." If the victim's clan did not shed the blood of someone from the murderer's clan, the spirits themselves would shed the blood of someone from the victim's clan instead. In other words, some of the victim's clanspeople would begin to suffer from throat bleeding or from bronchial hemorrhage, etc. Kreinovich writes: "Never and nowhere else among the other Nivkhs did I see so many people seriously ill with tuberculosis as in this clan in the village Chaivo. They explain the disease as a result of their failure to revenge their murdered clansman" (Kreinovich 1973: 389, transl. T. B.). Kreinovich considers that blood is needed for the "unavenged soul of the victim," but he does not explain why this "unavenged soul" revenges itself not upon its offender and his clan, but punishes its own clanspeople instead. From the point of view of the emic approach, the very fact of having somebody murdered in the clan establishes a strong connection with the spiritual world for this clan and the consequences of this connection are imitations of the event that has already happened. Blood was shed and the spirit-bird "*takht* gains access to the clanspeople and drinks their blood" (Kreinovich 1973: 389, transl. T. B.).

### Collective Clan Disease Caused by its Members Excessively Approaching the Spirits

There are many other critical situations that draw the whole clan towards the spirits as the result of the deeds of one clansperson. The essence of any taboo is to keep people at a safe distance from the spirits. K. M. Rychkov considers that community of 'sin' is of high profile for the unity of a clan. By 'sin' the scholar means breaking taboos and different prohibitions in the religious and social domain. Not to follow taboos and prohibitions, as Rychkov writes, means not to worry about self-preservation and the well-being of the entire clan (Rychkov 1922: 137). The entire clan is endangered

when its individual members do not refrain from deeds which may draw them towards the world of the clan spirits. If an individual commits a 'sin,' it affects not only him alone, but all his clanspeople. For example, an unnecessary dangerous connection with the spiritual world is established when animals are killed in too cruel a manner. Yevdokiya A. Gayer relates the following story narrated by her informant:

A hunter from the Malki village caught a hare. The hare was alive. He brought the hare home. He skinned it while the hare was alive. Then he let it go, without its skin. As a bloody dot the hare ran into the nearest forest. For long time people could hear its cry '*Singmal! Singmal! Mal! Mal!*' Crying like that the hare disappeared. The man jeered at his game. There were many people in the village, but soon all of them died (Gayer 1991: 17–18, transl. T. B.).

Gayer does not write that the inhabitants of Malki belonged to the same clan. But we can suppose that it was so, because of her conclusion: "For cruel behaviour towards animals, the person might pay with his own life as well as with the life of his clanspeople" (Gayer 1991: 17–18, transl. T. B.).

In the case of a murder, it is logical to expect that the spirits would also punish the guilty party and their clanspeople with some misfortune and would feel sorry for the victim's clanspeople. But as a matter of fact, it is the reverse. Paradoxically, as already mentioned, it is the clan of the victim, which is 'punished' with illnesses and misfortune. The murderer's clan is also affected, but differently. The violence once committed has a tendency to continue, the situation has a tendency to repeat and multiply, and the murderer's clan becomes inclined to violence. The informants explain it in the following way: having committed an act of violence, a person communicates with the spirits of violence, *ochiki*, and gives them access to his or her entire clan. The murderer's clanspeople become inclined to aggression and this becomes apparent in increasing numbers of suicides and quarrels. Increasing violence is even directed against their own clanspeople.

If a man has murdered someone [Komo says] *ochiki* will be transmitted to his children. His child will become evil and will be able to kill someone! [...] I remember [...] It even flashes my eyes right now. At first they tried to keep it back, they did not tell anybody anything about it. But then people nevertheless learned about it. [A boy] was an orphan and lived with his grandmother. They took him on a hunt as a cook. Then they noticed that when he was cooking [...] [The hunters thought that] he fed them porridge, but he himself secretly ate something different. He had put on weight. He was a good boy. [A hunter] said [to another one]: 'Do you not notice it? Why does he give us bad food while he him-

self eats something better? Let us kill him!' Another [hunter] answered: 'I am not able to kill him.' Then the first one murdered the boy, ripped open his stomach and examined it: 'No, there is nothing except some flakes of leather!' Then they buried him and returned home. We lost [that boy]. His grandmother cried. She went to a powerful shaman. She related what had happened. He [the shaman performed a ritual and] learned everything about it. All the men went [to those hunters to ask]. They came in. The younger [hunter] said: 'I did not do it.' The older man said: 'That was me, I did it. I thought that he offended us, fed us poorly and so forth. We killed him and ripped open his stomach to see what he had eaten'. They forced them to go there [to the *taiga*] and to point out the place where they had buried [the boy].

As the people learned about their clansman's crime, they did not punish him, but instead took some measures to prevent increasing violence within their clan. "They shamanized to drive away *ochiki* [from their clan] so that his [the murderer's] sons and daughters should not become like him" (Komo). "*Ochiki* is like a man, but invisible," Irina explains. "It forces people to kill each other. In the past it was also like that. People drank vodka and attacked each other with knives. *Ochiki* did it. When someone murders another person, *ochiki* appears. It inspires other people to do the same." *Ochiki*, as our informants assert, cannot pass to unrelated people, but it easily passes to the clanspeople of the murderer. Despite the fact that the Nanay have paternal affiliation, some signs of dual descent can be noticed. So, *ochiki* can be inherited not only through the father's but sometimes also through the mother's line and be transmitted not only from husband to wife but also from wife to husband. The shamaness Yelena's daughter knifed her first husband. Her second husband knifed himself in the presence of all the family. Commenting on this event, Marina states that *ochiki* have dwelt in Yelena's family. In Marina's opinion, they originated not from violence as such, but from Yelena's shamanic spirits.<sup>11</sup> These spirits came, as she explains, to Yelena's daughter and forced her to commit a crime. Then they passed through the daughter to the daughter's husband. "That old woman's [Yelena's] *sewens* [spirit-helpers] have been passing on [to the next generation]," Marina says.

You think what? Have they not been passing on? Everything is passing on through blood! Now my granddaughter makes a row and she does badly at school. My granddaughter or my grandson! It is my blood! Everything has been passing on! If I am a drunkard, my granddaughter is also a drunkard. My son is a drunkard too; it is going on that way! It has been transmitted through blood!

So the idea of clan blood revenge probably arises as a result of some efforts of the victim's clanspeople to choose the lesser of two evils. An inclination

towards violence is considered to be a less evil kind of misfortune compared with the fate of constantly being exposed to the risk of losing the blood of their clanspeople. In other words, clan blood revenge is probably nothing but an attempt by the victim's relatives to avoid the dependence on spirits that can multiply the number of sick and murdered clanspeople.

Dangerous intimacy with spirits also happens as a consequence of breaking exogamy. The Nanay consider that sexual intercourse usually entails a woman's communion with her partner's clan spirits. But when a woman joins spirits which are both her partner's and her own clan's spirits, she doubles her dependence on them. As a result, her closeness to the spiritual world affects her entire clan. Incest creates an unsafe intimacy with the spirits not only for the direct participants, but for the rest of the clanspeople as well. The clan spirits acquire the means to influence this clan more strongly and more dangerously than usual. The Nanay say that the participants in incest even 'give birth' to some new clan spirits belonging to the category *sajka/sadka*, which are "blood-thirsty" and carry out great devastation. I. Kozminsky wrote that almost any death that happens after a short illness people explain as the result of the interference by spirits born as a result of incest. These spirits are also believed to cause destructive epidemics (Kozminsky 1927: 44). The shamaness Yelena says that if someone commits incest, even secretly, all the clanspeople may gain numerous *ambans* (evil spirits). "A great number of such small *burkhans* [spirits] will appear. One [shaman] will not have time enough to kill them. [...] Children will fall ill, grow thin, just skin and bones!" Not only the children whose parent was a participant in incest suffer, but all the other children within the clan as well.

Brother and sister give birth to lots of *ambans*, which attack their clanspeople. [...] They [*ambans*] will disturb their clanspeople's children. The children will suffer from diarrhea. [...] Small children soon die from dehydration caused by diarrhea. There are such persons [spirits] that disturb them and come out of the genitals of those who committed incest, the *ambans* come out of their genitals. They also kill the old people Yelena.

Because the entire clan suffers from the consequences of incest, the clan court is usually harsh. "The old people met and discussed what to do with them. This one would say to kill them, another one would say to kill. So they killed them with lances" (Yelena).

From the emic point of view, it is explained that the entire clan depends on the deeds of any one member, since all the members of the clan are connected to the same clan spirits, which, in addition, are considered to be their relatives. Kinship with spirits is, as the Nanay see it, the result

of the spirits' ability to enter into sexual relationships with people which causes a close connection between the clanspeople and the clan spirits, not only for the shamans, but for all the clanspeople to a greater or lesser degree depending on their spirit-relatives. "Do all the ordinary people, who are not shamans, have *ambans*?" the shamaness Yelena was asked. "Sure," she answered. "It is so because they have *ambans* in their clan."

S. M. Shirokogorov noticed that one of the decisive characteristics of the clan was their common clan spirits. He wrote: "The clan is a secluded group of relatives on the paternal line. Besides being aware of their common origins, they consider that they depend on the common clan spirits" (Shirokogorov 1919: 47). Clan spirits affect relatives with a common male ancestor and with rare exceptions do not pass to other clans. "The Oninka clan has its own *ambans*. Kile have their *ambans*," Roza says. "Khodger have their *ambans*, Beldy have their *ambans*. [...] Each [clan] has their own *ambans*." "An alien *amban* will never approach a person," the shaman Tamara says. Being so, it is probably not the social differentiation which makes people look for certain identifying marks such as totem spirits, in order to fix the differentiation. On the contrary, their connection to the different zones of spiritual reality leads people to troubles that can only be solved by the collective efforts of the people who share the same troubles. This causes people to establish the given social units.

Common clan spirituality is expressed in the Nanay mythology by the clan's collective line (road) of life. The Ulchs (another people of the Tungus-Manchurian group) call this line *musu*. "*Musu* is the united line of the close relatives' life. Each clan and family has its own *musu*" (Smolyak 1991: 173). Anna V. Smolyak reports that sometimes "the Ulchs invited a shaman for a special ritual to correct their *musu*:"

If there is a good *musu* in the clan, all the people are healthy; they live in peace and friendship, have successful businesses, all of them think and act together. [...] *Musunchu* is a lucky person who has a good *musu* inherent in one clan, family. But when misfortune, quarrel or disease appears in the clan and the family, the old people said: 'It is time to correct *musu*' (Smolyak 1991: 173, transl. T. B.).

It is important to emphasize that using the idea of *musu*, the Nanay express shared good fortune as well as misfortune, which, they believe, really exists and unites all the clanspeople.

## Conclusion

Shirokogorov's discovery of a collective shamanic disease was unjustly forgotten in Russian anthropology, and this resulted in decreasing the chance



of success in examining kinship in traditional Tungus-Manchurian society.

To explain the prevalence of unilineal descent scholars mostly accentuate its social profit because it helps to unambiguously assign each individual to a certain group of relatives. Murdoch supposed that division into unilineal groups is needed to avoid confusion when it comes to the distribution of rights and duties in society. Differentiation and classification of the kin into agnates and cognates is needed, as he wrote, to define juridical relationships with each relative, to know what relatives to help, who is good for a marriage alliance, whom to leave inheritance (Murdoch 2003: 69–70). The social side of clanship is interpreted in this explanation as primary and basic. In contrast, the religious characteristics of the clan (the idea of common clan spirits, the totemic name of the clan) are described as necessary only for the identification of members of the kin group who live separately, because the religious specificity helps to maintain the knowledge of membership in the group (Murdoch 2003: 76). In other words, the religious order is considered to be secondary and derived from the social order.

This version leaves some models of traditional behaviour with no real explanation, such as why people neglect the close territorial connection with their close cognates and choose distant agnates they have perhaps never met when they decide whom to help and whom to refuse aid, whom to avenge and whom not. It also does not explain why, in some cases, the purity of the clan may be more important than saving the life of their children and why they prefer to kill a child whose mother conceals his or her father's name and whose membership in the clan is unclear. According to A. F. Startsev's materials, the Udege killed a child to avoid possible future breach of exogamy, which might happen when the child becomes an adult and searches for a spouse. If the child was not killed, "he was deprived of his rights and duties, he could not attend clan meetings, did not enjoy its support, could not take part in blood revenge. Being deprived of his rights and duties, he was forced to commit suicide later when he became adult" (Startsev 2005: 224, transl. T. B.).

It is quite another matter if we take into consideration collective clan disease in its acute and chronic condition, and the entire clan's dependence on spiritual events which affect its individual members. In connection with collective clan disease, the cases listed above can be explained. Unlike distant agnates, close cognates are excluded from those who are prone to collective disease which is why they are excluded from help and obligatory revenge. Also it would be dangerous to bring up a child who might belong to an alien clan and suffer from a different, alien clan collective disease, because one of the symptoms of such disease is unmotivated hostility towards the alien clan people. The Nanay say that they kill the illegitimate child because he



is considered to be an *amban*, a bearer of the alien, that is, evil spirit. After the adopted children become adults, the Nanay assert, they quarrel with their adopted parents and their clanspeople and sometimes even kill them. Running the danger of collective disease, the clan looks for a means of defense, which entails religious instructions and prohibitions. Being aware of unilineal descent and of their own place in it, people may define the circle of possible persons who could be subject to the similar mental and other troubles and who should look together for the means of a cure. If it is so, not social, but religious signs of clan are primary and determinant. The spiritual harmony of the unilineal clan assists people to realise their social unity. Social characteristics are secondary and derivative.

Even in exogamy the social side might be secondary, because religious ideas and religious experience underlie it. Lev Ya. Shternberg wrote that “there should be a powerful stimulus for creating such a strong and long-lived unit as a clan” (Shternberg 1933: 159, transl. T. B.). He considered that such a powerful stimulus was “commonness of sexual rights” (1933: 159, transl. T. B.), that people were united into clans to get the guarantee and mutual control of observance of clan rules. At the same time it is hard to imagine that order is kept for the sake of order and nothing else, that there are not more real dangers in the breaking of rules than mere social disapproval. Generalizing the field materials it could be presumed that exogamy is not an end in itself. It might be merely a means and a way of adaptation to the dangerous spiritual reality, which can stir to activity in cases of disorderly incestual relationships. The real stimulus which does not allow people to forget about their clan belonging is their spiritual unity instead, some common spiritual invisible space, which is available only to them and not to outsiders, which involves them in shared night dreams and visions and which constantly threatens them with common troubles. The stimulus to remember their clan peculiarity and exclusiveness is their collective clan shamanic disease, which demands common efforts and actions for its avoidance. Exogamy is but one of such means and actions. Despite the fact that clan spirits can help, they are potentially harmful. Therefore there is a system of taboos and prohibitions which keeps people at a distance from their clan spirits, and a system of rituals is needed to appease the spirits. There is also a danger caused by alien clan spirits which are considered to be evil just because they are outsiders. The system of taboos and rituals ensures that the clanspeople do not lose their main social and religious guidelines, their awareness of their clan belonging, which is important even when they live separately and take up residence far from each other.

Field materials collected in Siberia by Russian anthropologists at the beginning of the twentieth century were at some variance with the socio-

logical theory of the origin of clanship. Generalizing from their materials S. Brailovsky wrote that Tungus-Manchurian clans “represented congeneric-religious units” (Brailovsky 1901: 355, transl. T. B.), emphasising the religious components. S. M. Shirokogorov also wrote that not only one shaman is chosen by the spirits, but the entire clan is the spirits’ elected representative. According to his ideas, shamanism is not a matter for an individual, but a function of the entire clan (1919: 50). Shirokogorov asserted that the clan is needed as a means of adaptation to the dangers of the spiritual world, as a way to defend people from the harmful influence of both the clan spirits and the alien ones (Shirokogorov 1919: 48), and my field materials, collected almost a century later, completely confirm his ideas.

## NOTES

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- <sup>2</sup> S. A. Tokarev, I. S. Vdovin, and others.
- <sup>3</sup> This is, for instance, the position of George Peter Murdoch.
- <sup>4</sup> The Evenks belong to the northern branch of the Tungus-Manchurian group of peoples. They live in the Evenk autonomous district and some other districts of Eastern Siberia. There are 29,900 of the Evenks in the Russian Federation (information from 1992) and 35,000 in China. In addition to the Evenks, there are the Evens, who live on the shores of the Sea of Okhotsk and in Northern Yakutia and who are also included in the northern branch of the Tungus-Manchurian group of peoples. In this article I use the materials on the culture of the southern branch of the Tungus-Manchurian group of peoples. They are the Nanay (12,000), the Ulchi (3,173), the Udege (1,902), the Negidals (587), the Orok (200), and the Orochi (883), who live in the Far-East of Russia in the basin of the Amur river, in the Khabarovsk region, in the Primorye region and on Sakhalin Island (Russia).
- <sup>5</sup> The phenomenon of mass hysteria is mentioned by, for example, Mitskevich (1929) and Vitashevsky (1911).
- <sup>6</sup> In this article I use field materials collected since 1980 in the Nanay villages in Khabarovsk region. I do not mention here the real names of the informants, but replace them with false ones. My informants are mostly representatives of the generation that preserved the traditional shamanic culture. Most of them could hardly speak Russian and we communicated in the Nanay language.
- <sup>7</sup> Using obsolete terminology, it would be possible to say that the group predisposed to collective sickness should be more precisely determined as ‘sib.’ But because of the ambiguity of women’s position, on the one hand, and trying to follow both the contemporary terminology and that of the tradition to which Shirokogorov belongs, on the other hand, I refer to the kinship group attacked by the collective sickness as ‘clan.’
- <sup>8</sup> *Sewen* (in Nanay) is a spirit helper.
- <sup>9</sup> Zoya died young on the eve of her wedding. Her sisters believe that the tiger, her spirit husband, was jealous and killed Zoya to prevent her wedding.

- <sup>10</sup> Healing a person, the shaman travels within the spiritual world looking for his or her soul, finds it and returns to the patient. In their dreams two of Yuliana's sisters performed the shamanic healing ceremony. They confessed that they did not actually trust the shaman Komo's ability.
- <sup>11</sup> The Nanay word *ochiki* is probably a variant of the Manchurian word *vochko* which means spirits of the departed shamans that became the spirit-helpers of their descendants, the living shamans.

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