Chapter 4

Lower Amur Valley: The Amur Complex (Nanay, Ulcha, Orochi, Udehe, Ulta)

The concept of Amur complex as used here is synonymous with the generic term Nani which was proposed by Lev Shternberg to identify the group of very closely related peoples inhabiting the lower Amur valley and the northern half of the Maritime Region. Both terms are used interchangeably as a collective designation of the closely related languages (or perhaps more accurately, dialects) spoken by them. This Amur or Nani complex of Tungusic-speaking sedentary fishermen and hunters of the lower Amur valley is comprised of the following officially recognized ethnic groups: Nanay (including Hojen/Hejen on the Chinese side of the border), Ulcha, Ulta (also officially called Orok and unofficially Orochin; the Ulta resettled community in Abashiri of Hokkaido is no longer referred to in the Japanese katakana syllabary as Orokko but Uiruta), Orochi, and Udehe (also known as Udege; the group of culturally and linguistically Sinicized Udehe known as Tazy are included). The Negidal are sometimes included in this complex because of cultural similarities; however, since their core are descendants of relatively recent Tungus (Ewenki) migrants to the Amgun valley, discussion of their ethnogenesis and cultural formation is included in the section on the eastern Tungus. Although the Amur groups speak Tungusic languages and therefore are not customarily classified as Paleoasiatic peoples, their culture which is based on sedentary river fishing, and which differs profoundly from those of other Tungusic-speaking peoples, indicates a direct local development from pre-Tungusic riverine fishing cultures of the Neolithic period, with cultural influences from Manchuria (Mohe, Jurchen and Manchu) being relatively recent and rather superficial additions. The local non-Tungusic sources of their culture are also clearly evident in the large Paleoasiatic substratum vocabulary that mainly pertains to the subject of riverine subsistence and fishing technology. Their basic cultural unity with the Pacific Northeast Asian peoples, especially the Nivkh and Ainu, indicates their ethnogenetic role in the cultural development of the region.

Since Shternberg’s “Nani” designation has not been widely accepted by anthropologists, in contrast to linguists, the more descriptive term “Amur” is used in this chapter to refer to the ethnic complex.
a Ethnographic Synopsis

Background

The Amur complex consisting of the Nanay, Ulcha, Orochi, Udehe, and Ulta shares a common historical and cultural background including lineage composition, material culture and decorative art, social and political organization, religious beliefs, and oral traditions. They speak mutually intelligible languages/dialects that belong to the Amur-Nani branch of the Tungusic family. The division into separate languages has been established in a rather arbitrary manner as the dialects form a continuum; however, a minor dialectal break occurs between Nanay-Ulcha-Ulta and Orochi-Udehe. Three other ethnic units are sometimes added to the Amur group: 1. The Negidal of Amgun valley, whose culture is similar to that of the Amur fishermen but whose ethnic core consists of descendants of the Tungus and who speak a dialectal form of Tungus (Ewenki). 2. The Hojen (Hezhen) of the Sungari, the right bank of the Amur and the left bank of the Ussuri who are commonly classified as Chinese Nanay, although some of the Ussuri dialects appear to be closer to Udehe than to Nanay. 3. The Tazy of southern Maritime District who are usually considered Sinicized Udehe.

The term Nani for all the members of the complex was originally suggested by Lev Shternberg who considered them to be culturally and linguistically related closely enough to justify their treatment as a single ethnic entity. He proposed to call the Nanay "Lower Amur Nani", the Ulcha "Downriver Nani", the Orochi (and by implication Udehe) "Southeastern Nani", and the Ulta "Sakhalin Nani". Various other random combinations distinguished the Amur ethnic classification and corresponded with local ethnic identities which were equally arbitrary and subjective until the 1920s, since geographic regions such as river valleys or lineage membership served as stronger identity determinants than dialectal or cultural factors. At present the Amur complex is officially divided into separate ethnic groups and classified in Russia as the Nanay, Ulcha, Orochi, Udehe (including Tazy), and Ulta (referred to as Orok during the Soviet period), and in China as Hojen (Hezhen). Their uniformity based on sedentary fishing notwithstanding, each group has its own additional characteristics: gardening and pig-breeding of some upper Nanay groups (particularly those that lived in proximity to areas inhabited by the Manchu), reindeer-breeding of the northern Ulta, sea hunting of some Ulcha and Orochi communities, emphasis on land hunting among the Udehe and upriver segments of several other groups, etc. These and other local cultural peculiarities often cut across ethnic boundaries. The same applies to the lineage and doha (lineage alliance) composition which is generally unrelated to the ethnic divisions.