Sakhalin Island: Nivkh

The Nivkh (or Gilyak in older literature) have traditionally inhabited the northern half of Sakhalin Island and adjacent regions of the mainland. They are relatively homogeneous in the cultural sense; their differences are mainly based on local adaptations to geographic environments, and the two distinct dialects, Sakhalin and mainland, are mutually intelligible. Their ethnic composition is more homogeneous than that of their Tungusic-speaking Amur neighbors as it consists of a large core of kin groups of Nivkh origin and a minority of lineages that trace their descent to non-Nivkh ethnic ancestors, mainly those of Amur groups and Ainu.

Nivkh culture, with its emphasis on sedentary fishing, is to a large extent analogous to those of their Amur and Ainu neighbors; however, the specialized maritime hunting of the coastal Nivkh was of a significance equal to fishing, and their sea-mammal hunting technology as well as the belief system emphasizing marine animal cults connect the Nivkh with North Pacific coastal cultures of both sides of the Bering Strait, and archaeologically, with the maritime Okhotsk culture of the southern Sea of Okhotsk and the Old Koryak culture of northern Sea of Okhotsk. Other traits that distinguish the traditional Nivkh culture from their neighbors are aspects of their non-material culture such as corpse disposal by cremation and the alliance of three lineage units based on asymmetric connubium that contrasts with the reciprocal connubium characteristic for the mainland Tungus society as well as for the Amur ethnic complex. Nivkh spiritual culture is dominated by the cults of the killer-whale that is believed to be responsible for the supply of all the fish, and the bear that is thought to be the guarantor of animal meat. Similar beliefs are present among the Ainu and the peoples of the Amur complex, and the ethnographic and archaeological evidence indicates that such beliefs and rituals were primarily developed among the bearers of the Okhotsk culture, and borrowed by their neighbors. Material culture, art, and fishing technology of the ethnographic Nivkh was almost indistinguishable from their nearest neighbors in the lower Amur valley, the Ulcha, Orochi, and Negidal prior to the 20th century, leading early Chinese and Russian writers to treat all these groups as a single people (called Jilimi, Gilemi or Gilimi in Chinese, Gilyak in Russian) despite their linguistic differences – Nivkh being a language isolate (or a member of the non-genetic Paleoasiatic group as proposed by Schrenk/Shrenk, 1883), not a member of the Tungusic family to which the languages of the Amur ethnic complex belong.
This section treats the Nivkh as a singular ethnic group rather than a part of an ethnic complex. Major regional cultural and linguistic differences probably existed in the past, but they became obscured by large-scale human movements during both the expansion of Okhotsk culture (5th–12th century) and its demise caused by Ainu colonization of the southern one-third of Sakhalin. In the mainland as well, it has been suggested that some of the sedentary fishing groups of the Amur complex may have originally included ancestors related to Nivkh; however, substratum vocabularies in those languages indicate a distinct, non-Nivkh source, and therefore the Nivkh may never have been widespread on the mainland beyond the coastal belt and Amur estuary, in contrast to Sakhalin island which was probably wholly inhabited by the ancestors of the Nivkh before the colonization of its southern regions by the Ainu from Hokkaido during the 11th and 12th centuries, and the Ulta arrival from the mainland and their settlement in the middle sections of the island between the 15th and early 17th centuries.

a Ethnographic Synopsis

Background
The ethnonym Nivkh (‘human being’ in the Amur dialect) has been the predominant designation since the 1930s official shift favoring autonyms. Its variants are Nivkhi (Russian plural form) and, less commonly, Nivkhgu (indigenous Amur dialect plural). The older ethnonym Gilyak (Ghilliak, Giliak, Gilyaki, etc.) is still frequently used in parallel with Nivkh mainly in non-Russian literature due to the strength of ethnographic classics published prior to the 1930s. The term Gilyak is a Russified form of the Tugusic and Manchu-Chinese names Gileke and Gilemi (Gilmim, Gilyami) that referred mainly to the Nivkh.

The Nivkh traditional area of inhabitance is located both on the mainland and on Sakhalin Island. The former is composed of up to 100 km of the lower course of the Amur River including its tributaries, its estuary region, and the sea coast approximately 100 km to the south and 250 km to the north and northwest of the Amur estuary. The latter region is made up of the northern half of the island, especially its coasts and large river valleys. Shantar islands in the Sea of Okhotsk were inhabited by the Nivkh until the 1730s (Tugolukov 2013: 38–40). Both the mainland and island regions are located in an intermediate temperate-Subarctic zone characterized by four seasons with long, cold winters and short, cool summers. Every season is marked by high precipitation which explains the dense, lush coniferous and in some areas mixed coniferous-deciduous forests that cover much of the area of the lower Amur. Northern