

SIBERIA

CHARRIN, ANNE-VICTOIRE. *Le petit monde du Grand Corbeau. Récits du Grand Nord sibérien* [The little world of Big-Raven. Tales from Siberia's far north]. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1983. 208 pages. Maps, black and white photographs, bibliography. Paper 98 FF. (In French)

This book is a collection of myths from the Koryak, inhabitants of Kamchatka, in north-east Siberia. Their population is estimated as 7,900 persons according to the census of 1979. They share the area together with some other peoples such as the Chukchee, Itelmen (historically known as Kamchadal), Yukaghir, Eskimo, and Aleut. Along with that of the Koryak, their languages belong to the group of "paleoasian languages." The inhabitants along the shores of the Okhotsk and Bering Seas generally form settlements and live on fishing and hunting of sea-mammals such as seals, whales, walrus and so forth. Their admirable adaptation to marine ecology can archaeologically be traced back deep into the remote past. Some groups, in contrast, are living on reindeer breeding and lead a wandering life inland. The two kinds of life style are typical for both the Koryak and Chukchee; for this reason they are divided into maritime Koryak, maritime Chukchee, and reindeer Koryak, reindeer Chukchee.

Thus the area in the north-east of Euroasia settled by these peoples forms a microcosmos, clearly distinct from the other parts of Siberia in economy and culture. From an ethnological or prehistorical viewpoint that area is rather closely related to the northern part of the New World. Some of the best implications for such ethnogenetic relations come from mythology; myths of the so-called "Raven-cycle" are widespread among the peoples of the coastal areas of the northern Pacific, including the north-west coast of North America.

Anne-Victoire Charrin's is a rich documentation for what those myths of the Big-Raven are among the Koryak. She arranges them according to their heroes and subjects into five groups: cycle of spirit-masters, cycle of shamans, sexual and scatologic cycle, cycle of malevolent spirits, and cycle of incest. Charrin takes the texts for her translations mainly from the work of W. Jochelson, who carried out his field work among the Koryak in the years of 1900-1901, taking part in the Jesup North Pacific Expedition. His book *The Koryak* (1908), which is the most fundamental ethnological study on this people, contains 130 tales of the Koryak and nine of the Kamchadal. Jochelson had arranged the Koryak tales in six parts according to the places where he had collected them. The majority of the tales (forty-five texts) originate from the Reindeer Koryak of the Taigonos Peninsula. Charrin includes most of them in her translation together with several texts from the works of Soviet scholars as S. N. Stebnickij, I. S. Vdovin, A. N. Žukova.

The cycle of the spirit-masters includes five tales with cosmological subjects; e.g., the making or stopping of rain; the swallowed sun. In the cycle of shamans the first tale "Kujkynnjaku and the shamanesses" quite simply tells us what shamans are to the Koryak. One of the Shaman's functions is concerned with human life itself: A shaman has the skill to revive human beings from death. Another distinctive ability of the shaman is shown in "Shamaness Kytna," viz., that of transformation. In this tale a mother, shamaness Kytna, in searching for her missed daughter Ralinavut, transforms herself into a wolf. Finally, it is worth mentioning that some tales refer to shamans' contests.

Some tales in the sexual and scatologic cycle depict aspects of the family-life of the Koryak, as when the Creator and his wife Miti make dogs out of their privates

(“ Creator, Miti, and their dogs ”), just because the old need someone to help them, after their children have married and moved away. The making of some beings out of others seems to be a favorite theme among the Koryak, whereby the circumstances for such creations do not always have to be serious. In some of these tales the hero (Creator or Big-Raven) is even ridiculed.

Tales of the cycle of malevolent spirits are especially interesting as they reflect Koryak ideas on those cannibalistic evil creatures called *kala(u)*, *kele* or *nirvits*. Generally *kala* are antagonistic to Creator with his family and to his people. In some cases, though, marriage with a *kala* may be possible. Illness and death are derived from them. *Kala* often seem to reside in the lower world, from where they emerge through the hearth. The lower world of the *kala* is implied as being the world of the dead.

The cycle of incest demonstrates a diversity in tales. Here we find tales of ‘ brother-sister marriage,’ tales of marriage between members of the Creator’s family and the Sun Man or his daughter, or stories of marriage with animals, the Grass-Woman and other creatures.

Reading through these tales we have come to admire the author for her success in constructing the world of Koryak lore out of a heap of various kinds of tales. The arrangement in cycles, each with its different heroes and subjects, helps us form concrete ideas about the content of the tales. It’s quite difficult to obtain this from simply reading through the tales, when they are lined up without any thematic order, as in the original work of W. Jochelson. It’s also impossible to grasp the real world of the people which is reflected in their folklore when the materials are investigated and arranged in a special framework as it is often done in comparative studies. Charrin has helped us to perceive the “ little world ” of Koryak lore in its dynamic aspect.

It is true that the folklore of the Paleoasians is extremely divergent in content as well as in genres. And so is the profile of Big-Raven, whom the Koryak often identify with Creator. They may both act as elders in the family with dignity at one time and then, quite to the contrary, as a trickster or a fool who deserves an impudent laughter and ridicule. Certainly it is a cardinal and at the same time quite fascinating problem to inquire the whole way of how Creator and/or Big-Raven has descended from the top to the bottom of the ladder. Such research might yield hints for our thinking about the derivation of literature from myth on the one hand, and shed light on the ethnic relations between the Paleoasians and the Indians of the north-west coast of North America on the other.

If we widen our view of the lore of the Koryak and include also that of other peoples in the area we can find parallels in the mythology of the peoples in the Amur-Basin and on Sakhalin Island. One of them might be the widespread myths of “ brother-sister marriage,” which show great diversity in East Asia, including Japan and Southeast Asia. In particular the type we call for convenience’ sake “ prosecuting by animals ” in consequence of incest forms clusters among the peoples of Tungus languages in the area of the Amur-Basin, as Orochi, Ul’chi and Udekhe.

Together with Edgar Faure who has given the book a fine forward, we greatly appreciate Charrin’s contribution to bring a new dimension to the study of Paleoasian lore. We hope that her efforts would make Big-Raven croak more and reveal its secrets to us.

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