

Totems and Amulets in the Nanaian Spiritual Culture

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The Northern Review #22 (Winter 2000): 86-88.

Totemism is one of the most interesting questions in the field of research concerning the world views, cultures and histories of northern indigenous peoples. Since northern peoples traditionally had extensive contact with a wide range of animals and plants, they viewed all objects and phenomena as animate. Extending from this experience, special world outlooks and religious beliefs came to appear. They developed animism, the main belief of which is the existence of various spirits and souls. Animism was a base of hunting cults, funeral rites, shamanism and totemism.

A key feature of totemism is that the totem is considered to be an ancestor of a given social group. Each member of that group was convinced that the totem was indeed his blood relative and protector. The term "Totem" was borrowed from the language of the Ojibway of North America, in whose language it means "His Kin." Any animal, bird, amphibian, fish, or, in more rare cases, plant and inanimate objects can constitute a totem. The Nanai people have myths that tell about the origins of some of their ancestors from the animal kingdom (e.g., bear, tiger, etc.).

The tiger occupied one of the foremost positions in the spiritual culture of the native peoples inhabiting the Amur River and coastal regions of the Russian Far East. Its significant place in local spiritual culture was reflected in

the material culture of the people of the region. The tiger was painted on *ongones* and on other shamanic attributes, its sculpture was made from wood and dry grass, its picture was engraved on boxes made of birch bark, and it was embroidered on cloth with coloured thread. These ways of creating artwork have been known to the native inhabitants of the Amur River region since the late Stone Age.

The tiger could appear in the taiga (out on the land) as either an animal or as an old man, who was depicted as being grey-haired and richly dressed. The tiger was capable of acting not only as a kind spirit, but also an evil one, who was known as *amba* (devil) and who could cause harm to people. *Amba* could appear before people in various forms: as a bird (*amba gahani*), a person (*amba mi*), or an animal (*amba buani*). The Upper Nanai people believed the tiger to be the master of the taiga. This is a belief that we can also find in cults of those Nanai people who are living at the lower reaches of the Amur River. While the cult of the bear is more typical for the various populations inhabiting Siberia, it is the cult of the tiger that was more characteristic for those peoples who live in the regions south of the Amur River. The tiger was also considered to be the master of mountains by Manchurians, Chuans and a number of other ethnic groups of Southern and Eastern Asia, who reside in areas this animal also inhabited.

Amulets made of metal, wood, or dry grass exhibited a picture of the tiger and were either worn around the neck or placed near the head of the bed to protect the owner against the power of evil spirits, which could bring sickness, failure and even death. The author must note a combination of zoomorphous and anthropomorphous features of *savans* that, according to local myth, entailed a transformation from man to tiger and back.

The animistic world views of the native inhabitants of the Amur River region and neighbouring coastal areas combined with magic actions, faith in

the power of amulets, charms and other beliefs. Many *savans* probably descended from amulets. A *savan* is a spirit who has a mind and can engage in activity, but is without a physical body. On the one hand, *savan* is an apparition with a soul. A *savan* is viewed as a real thing, because it is made from earth's elements—metal, wood, bone, birch bark, straw, or it is painted on cloth or paper. *Savans* are abstract figurines of men, animals, birds, amphibians, or reptiles. *Savans* are viewed as spirit-healers, spirit-deities, or spirit-masters of area, water, taiga, or hunting lands.

On the other hand, a *savan* is a spirit invisible to ordinary people. Non-material spirits include spirits-protectors, spirits-executors of a shaman's will, and spirit-helpers. These aspects of this phenomenon could only be experienced by shamans and were observed only by them. Non-material spirits include the spirit host or hostess of fire, the spirit of an area and the spirit of hunting lands. For instance, according to the Nanai people, who inhabit the lower end of the Amur River, a master of bears was a master of the taiga at the same time. This particular spirit is envisioned as a huge bear with nine humps. All gifts presented during the holiday of the bear were offered to this invisible master.

According to animism, spirits are divided into two categories: those that are kind and those that are evil. Kind spirits were guards, healers, and helpers that protected people. Nanai peoples called them *Savan* or *Savaki*. The *Amba* or *Amban* were evil spirits, which were intent on inflicting damage upon people. Evil spirits included devils, man-eaters, vampires and other evil entities. Both good and evil spirits had regular appearances and names, but were also able to change their names, transform under various circumstances, and incarnate into different animals or inanimate objects.

The main cult of the shaman is known as *piuha*. It is embodied in the form of a sacred tree, which symbolizes an individual deity—it is the so-called

tree of life. If the head of family of someone who is kin possesses *piuha*, then it constitutes a sacred tree for the whole family or kin of that person. *Piuha* is placed into a hole, which is hollowed out from the tree in the form of a three-edged cone. There was a rite of sacrifice associated with this, called *casia galauri*, which would take place before *piuha*. During field research by the author, information was collected about the female Udegei shaman N. L. Martinova, who was born in 1907 and inhabits the village of Krasny Iar in the Poscharsky District of Primorsky Territory (Krai). It was discovered that she has a sacred tree with a hollowed-out triangle *piuha*, to which people would submit a prayer when they fell ill.

The Nanai people believe that *piuha* contains the souls of their parents, who were believed to become divine beings upon rising to heaven. Thus, they are considered to be holy and immortal. One's predecessors are seen to be connected with their deceased relatives by their souls, just as ancestors are seen to protect and secure the safety of their offspring. On the other hand, however, if these predecessors violate those spiritual laws set by their ancestors, then they can be punished. In order to ask forgiveness for those deeds considered to be immoral within Nanai culture, it was necessary to carry out the rite of sacrifice.

Kalgama spirits could appear as anthropomorphous giants. They helped in hunting and fishing. Nanaians believed that *kalgama* lived in caves among the mountains. There are some who believe that *kalgama* is related to the phenomenon dubbed as Bigfoot. Wooden figures of *kalgama* were sometimes constructed on hunting lands. It was at such locations that a rite of sacrifice would be executed. *Kalgama* could be depicted as a single or double figure. Single versions reached one-and-a-half metres in height and represented a woman-mistress of the mountains or of another area. A dog was often viewed as a companion to *kalgama*.

Some *savans* were also thought to have companions called *adaha*, which were smaller anthropomorphous *savans* with pointed caps. They were depicted in the material culture of the Nanai people. They could be painted at the breast, or consist of two metal or wooden charms. They are worn around the neck for a lucky hunt.

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