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Notes on Nivkh ethnonymy

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The Nivkh (Gilyak, Ghilyak) people, as a population, are considered to be direct descendants of the Neolithic inhabitants of the lower reaches of Amur River and the Island of Sakhalin in the Russian Far East. According to their areas of residence, the Nivkh are divided into two large groups, which can be further split into local sub-groups, each with their own features in language, culture and tribal composition. The Amur (mainland) Nivkh traditionally lived in small settlements located along the banks of spawning rivers on the Lower Amur, along the coast of the Sea of Okhotsk and the Tartar Strait, which separates Sakhalin from the Asian mainland. On Sakhalin, the Nivkh occupied the northwestern and northeastern coasts of the island, the valley of the river Tym, as well as the Schmidt Peninsula. A small group of the Nivkh also lived at the mouth of the river Poronai around the Gulf of Patience (in Russian *Zaliv Terpeniia*). The traditional occupations of the Nivkh used to be fishing and maritime hunting, as well as forest hunting and gathering.

Over the past 150 years, the size of the Nivkh ethnic group has remained rather stable at about 4000–5000, despite alternating periods of population growth and decline. According to the latest census (2010), there were 4652 Nivkh living in Russia, of whom 2682 resided on Sakhalin. During the same period, the number of competent Nivkh speakers has decreased a hundred times and now amounts to no more than 50 people.

According to the classification proposed by Leopold von Schrenck in the middle of the 19th century, the Nivkh language belongs to the category of “Paleoasiatic” languages — the most “ancient” languages of Northeast Asia, genetically not related to each other nor to any other languages. Within this group Nivkh is today normally classified as an isolate language, but it is actually characterized by rather strong internal variation and represents a linguistic continuum that can be subdivided into two dialectal groups, which linguistically fulfil the criteria of separate languages. The Amur varieties are spoken on the mainland and on the northern and western shores of Sakhalin, while the Sakhalin varieties are used throughout the rest of the Nivkh territory. Except for Ainu, another “Paleoasiatic” isolate language, the neighbours of the Nivkh have historically spoken various Tungusic languages, including Uilta, Ulcha, Nanai, Neghidal, Ewenki, Ewen, Oroch, and Udihe.

During various historical periods, the Nivkh have been identified by different names, a situation which, on the one hand, relates to the formation of the Nivkh

ethnic community, and on the other hand, is explained by the gradual penetration and increasing “acquaintance” of newcomers with the traditional territories of the indigenous peoples of the Lower Amur and Sakhalin. The general tendency has been to use initially a single generic term for several different ethnic groups, and then gradually differentiate both the communities themselves and their names from each other.

It is known that since the 9th century the Chinese called several Mongolic and related tribes that lived to the northwest by the name *Dada* (韃靼) ‘Tatars’. This name later spread to the Tungusic tribes who lived in the northeast. According to Schrenck (1883: 140–141), the name *Dazi* (韃子) ‘(Northern) Barbarians’ was used primarily in relation to the ancestors of the Oroch and Udihe, who occupied vast areas down to the border of Korea. A variant of this term was *Yupi Dazi* (魚皮韃子) ‘Fish-skin Tatars’, which was applied generically to all the ethnic groups of the Lower Amur. Obviously, this term was used collectively in relation to the local peoples, but especially to the ancestors of the modern Nanai, Ulcha and Nivkh, who were known for making clothes of fish skin.

The first information about the Nivkh is found in Chinese sources of the Jurchen Jin dynasty (1115–1234) and the Mongolian Yuan dynasty (1271–1368), when trade and exchange relations with the peoples of the Amur region began to develop. During this period, the Lower Amur was a densely populated area called Nurgan (Panov 1865: 2). The most accurate account of the settlement and customs of the peoples of the Lower Amur is found in the description contained in the *Kaiyuan xinzhì* (開原新志) ‘New Annals of the Kaiyuan District’ of the Yuan dynasty, one of the sections of which is titled *Ruzhi* (女直) ‘Jurchens’. This section mentions a people by the name *Jiliemi* (吉烈迷), in other sources also *Jilimi* (吉里迷), who were divided into four tribes. The *Jiliemi* are usually identified with the Nivkh, or *Gilyak*, but more probably this name indicated several different ethnic groups. According to A. M. Zolotarev (1939: 11), it was a collective name for both the Nivkh and the Tungusic tribes living on the lower reaches of the Amur, who shared many common cultural and economic features. Wada Sei suggests that of the four *Jiliemi* tribes only those who lived near the mouth of the Amur were “real *Jiliemi*”. Three other tribes – the “wild Jurchens”, “savages of the northern mountains”, or simply “savages” – were Tungusic speaking (Wada 1938: 78–79, 101).

After the overthrow of the Yuan dynasty, the Chinese Ming dynasty (1368–1644) began to pursue an active foreign policy with the aim of subjugating the peoples of the Amur region. In 1404, the Nurgan guard was created. In 1409, it was transformed into the border military-administrative department, which became the center of a huge territory. A tribute, consisting of falcons and sable furs, was to be collected from the local peoples. In 1410, a large military expedition of representatives of the Ming administration set off down the Amur. In order to commemorate this event the Buddhist temple *Yongningsi* (永寧寺) ‘Temple of Eternal Tranquility’ and a stone stele with inscriptions in Chinese, Mongolian and Jurchen languages were erected in 1413 on the Tyr cliff, an important landmark located near the confluence of the river Amgun into the Amur.

The inscriptions on the Tyr steles talk about the Ming expedition and the construction of the temple and praise the Ming emperor and his policy towards the subjugated peoples. The most detailed description of the peoples of the Lower Amur is

given in the Chinese text, which tells that the population of the country of Nurgan is composed of *Jiliemi* (吉烈迷), as well as several other kinds of wild peoples. Their main occupations are fishing, eating fish meat, and dressing in fish skin (Golovachev et al. 2012: 94). In the accompanying Jurchen and Mongolian texts, which are very close to each other in content, it is said only that the *Gilemi* and *Udigen* (Jurchen) / *Üdigen* (Mongolian) people wanted to come to bow to the emperor, but could not get to the place, since their land was located too far away (Golovachev et al. 2012: 117, 131, 164, 167).

The temple was subsequently destroyed by the local people, but in 1432 it was rebuilt. On the occasion of this event, a second stele was erected, on which there is an inscription only in Chinese. It also mentions local peoples. “[Among the local] people there are Jurchens, or savages, *Jiliemi* and *Kuyi*. Their speech is incomprehensible without a double translation. It is impossible to win their hearts without a military threat. It is difficult to reach their lands without a boat trip ... The customs and manners [of them] are so different [that] it is impossible to convey [it] in its entirety” (Golovachev et al. 2012: 272).

In the above texts, the *Gilemi* / *Jiliemi* are already more clearly associated with the Nivkh. The Old Mandarin reading of *Jiliemi* (吉烈迷) must have been something like [kilemi], which corresponds to the Jurchen original *Gilemi*, on which Mongolian *Gilemi* was also based (Golovachev et al. 2012: 142). The borrowing of the Jurchen term *Gilemi* into Mongolian and Chinese is quite natural, since both the Mongols and the Chinese apparently first learned about the Nivkh exactly from the Jurchens, who inhabited a large part of Manchuria, including adjacent parts of China and Korea, in the 10th to 16th centuries, after which they were reorganized into the later Manchu ethnicity.

According to E. A. Kreinovich (1955: 151), Russian explorers of the 17th century received the first information about the Nivkh from the Vitim Tungus (Ewenki), who served as their guides. Other sources draw a slightly different picture. The report of the Cossack Kolobov, a participant of Ivan Moskvitin’s trip to the Pacific, states that in the spring of 1640 at the mouth of the river Ulia, Muscovites heard from a captured Ewen that “from them to the right, on the summer side, on the islands in the sea, there live the Tungus, the sedentary *Gilyak*, who fed bears ...” (cited from Rudnikova 2008: 22). Here, the question is undoubtedly about the Nivkh, who traditionally fattened bears for the bear ceremony. In 1643, Vasily Poyarkov with a large detachment of servicemen reached the Amur basin and descended to its mouth. Poyarkov’s detachment spent there the winter of 1644–1645, and then, already in the following summer, sailed north along the Okhotsk coast. Poyarkov reported that “the sedentary *Gilyak* live on both sides of the Amur, ... and many *Gilyak* people live on the islands and capes and eat fish” (cited from Zolotarev 1939: 18).

Judging by these historical documents, the exonym *Gilyak* (*gilyák*) entered the Russian language through the Ewen, in whose language the Nivkh are called *Gileke*, although the form of this word is not quite typical of the Tungusic languages. A similar assumption is made in (Janhunen 1985: 76). By analogy with other ethnonyms (for example, *permyák* ‘a person living in Perm’, *sibiryák* ‘a person living in Siberia’), the Ewen word was Russianized and reanalysed as containing the suffix *-ak* / *-yak*.

A different view was expressed by Schrenck (1883: 101–107), who believed that

Russian *gilyak* is based on the ethnonym *Kil(i)*, widely used in the Amur region to denote various groups of the Ewenki. From the root *kil* the Russians would, according to Schrenck, have coined forms such as *kilyak*, *kilyaits*, *kilyan*, and then *gilyak*, *gilyaits*, *gilyan*. In the light of today's knowledge, Schrenck's etymological proposal must, however, be judged to be mistaken. It should be noted, however, that the Nivkh themselves call the Ewenki by the terms *kilŋ* (East-Sakhalin Nivkh), *kil* (Amur Nivkh), based on the root *kil* < **kili*, whose ultimate origin remains unclear. Other names used by the Nivkh for the Tungusic peoples in the neighbourhood include *yand* (Amur Nivkh) for the Nanai, as well as *orŋar* (East-Sakhalin Nivkh) ~ *orŋar* (Amur Nivkh) for the Uilta and Oroch. The latter name is based on the widespread ancient ethnonym *Uryangkhai*, as used historically for several Tungusic and non-Tungusic peoples in Manchuria and Siberia (Janhunen 2014).

The fact remains that in many Tungusic languages, the exonym for the Nivkh is formed from the root **gile*, cf. e.g. Neghidal *gilaxa*, Oroch, Ulcha, and Nanai (dialectal) *gile*, Uilta *gileye*, Oroch, Udihe, and Nanai (dialectal) *gilemi*. There is, consequently, no reason to doubt that both Jurchen *gilemi* and its Chinese reflex *jiliemi*, as well as Russian *gilyák* are based on this ethnonymic complex. The original meaning of the root **gile* is usually associated with the obsolete Ulcha word *gile* 'large rowing boat of closed type' and the Nanai word *gila* 'large multi-oar boat for six pairs of rowers' (Shternberg 1933: 543, Tsintsius 1975: 152). In A. Fridlender's work (1918: 8), the name of the flat-bottomed boat, from which, in the author's opinion, the word *gilyak* originated, is given in the form of *gil'ya*.

Indeed, the peoples of the Lower Amur had boats of both small and large capacity. However, we must not forget that the so-called "Amur boat" was widespread not only among the Nivkh, but among all the inhabitants of the Lower Amur. This fact justifies Schrenck's (1883: 107) view, according to which not only the Nivkh, but also other inhabitants of the Lower Amur could be called *Gilyak*. Furthermore, following L. Ya. Shternberg (1933: 345), we may suggest that during the period of acquaintance with the Manchu, the ancestral populations of all these peoples still spoke the same language. Considering the possibility that this common language was Nivkh, we may assume that in the process of the gradual shift of the Amur peoples to the Tungusic languages, the name *Gilyak* (in different forms) was kept only for the community that preserved the Nivkh language. This hypothesis is fully consistent with the idea of the expansion of Nivkh from its supposed ancestral home in the basin of the Sungari and Ussuri rivers down the Amur (Janhunen 1996: 229–237).

In (Schrenck 1883: 115), we can find a less known ethnonym for the Nivkh, namely *Fiaka* or *Fiyaka*. In the atlas "A Journey to China through Mongolia in 1820 and 1821", compiled by E. F. Timkovski, *Fiaka* is characterized as a wild, ignorant, but brave people, who in the winter wear fur coats made of dog skins and live along the seashore and around the mouth of the Amur (cited by Schrenck 1883: 116). This term is also found in Chinese sources — Chinese *Feiyaka* 費雅喀 or 飛牙喀 — as well as in the documents of French Jesuits and the works of Japanese travelers. Like *Gilemi* / *Jiliemi* it was apparently used in a broad sense, implying not only the Nivkh, but also some of their neighbours, such as the Ulcha, Neghidal and Oroch (Dedyakhin 2003). In Manchu, the word *fiyaka* is attested in the phrase *heje fiyaka(n)* as referring to the 'country and people to the north of Girin' (Tsintsius 1977: 298, 442), with *heje* being

identical with the ethnonym *Hezhe(n)*, as used for the Nanai and related Tungusic-speaking groups on the Sungari and the Lower Amur.

The historical and geographical dictionary of Manchuria (Gibert 1934: 159) contains the following explanation: “*Fiakha* or *Fiak’a*, Chinese *Fei-ya-ha* .. or *Fei-ya-k’a*. – The Tungusic tribe inhabiting the lower reaches of the Amur. These Tunguses do not shave their heads; they like to wear large ornaments in their ears and small ones on their nose. They use birch bark boats and are part of the *Shi-lu-bu* 使鹿部, that is, a group of Tungus who breed deer and reindeer.”

The mention of abundant decorations and birch bark boats suggests that these people were in fact the Udihe, although they are not known to have kept reindeer. The hypothesis about the potential source of the term *Feiyaka* and its variants in the Udihe language is confirmed by the information from (Startsev 2015), where the name *Fekha*, *Feiyaki* (*Fayaki*) is related to the Udihe ethnonym *Pyaka* (*Peiyaka*). According to Chinese sources, this continental clan presumably occupied the basins of the Ussuri, Iman and Vaka rivers. Pursued by the Manchu troops, it was forced to leave this territory. In the light of these events and considering the regular change $*p > f$, which took place in the Manchu language, the hypothesis of the origin of the word *Feiyaka* from *Peiyaka* seems quite plausible. The origin of this ethnonym, in turn, may be related to the name of the local river *Peya*. Currently, the name of this clan sounds like *Peonka* (*Pyanka*, *Pionka*). Interestingly, the Udihe themselves use the term *Pyaka* with respect to the Oroch people (Larkin 1964: 15), which possibly means that the ancient clan of *Pyaka* was actually of Oroch origin.

In the materials collected by Russian researchers in the 19th century on Sakhalin, we can find one more exonym for the Nivkh people. In the Ainu dictionary compiled by the naval officer N. V. Rudanovski (1991: 116), who served and conducted research on southern Sakhalin in 1853–1854, the term ‘Gilyak’ is translated as *Santa*. Similarly, the Ainu-Russian dictionary published by the military doctor M. M. Dobrotvorski (1875: 283), who worked on Sakhalin from 1867 to 1872, contains the following entry: “*Sanda guru*... Inhabitant of the northern part of Karafuto Island”.

In order to understand the origin of the term *Santa*, we must recall that the region of the Lower Amur and Sakhalin was an area of ancient trade routes. Archaeological evidence confirms that the mainland peoples, as well as the peoples of Sakhalin and Hokkaido have been in contact at least since the late Paleolithic (Sasaki 1999: 86). Sakhalin served as a bridge connecting the Japanese island with the Amur basin, Manchuria and northern China. Trade took place along this path at least as early as the 15th century, and during the Edo period (1603–1868) it was already in full bloom. The trade route went through Hokkaido and then continued along the western coast of Sakhalin up to the Nevelskoy Strait – the narrowest and shallowest place in the Tartar Strait. The traders first dragged the boats to the river Taba, which has its source about two kilometers from the coast, and then moved to Lake Kizi and further to the Amur main basin.

The route, process and customs of these trading activities are described in detail in the works of the Japanese explorer Mamiya Rinzō, who travelled to Sakhalin and the Lower Amur in 1808–1809. He is considered to have been the first non-local who established the existence of a strait between Sakhalin and the mainland, for which reason the Japanese call the Nevelskoy Strait by the name Mamiya Strait. J. Harrison (1954: 280) identifies the participants of this trade as *Santan*, *Ainu*, *Kirin*, *Gilyak*, and

Orokko. Obviously, the term *Santan* refers to some ethnic group living on the mainland in the region around the lake Kizi, which is geographically located at the crossroads of trade routes coming from Sakhalin and moving towards the Amur basin. We should also remember that the Japanese used the term *Santan* (山丹) as a place name for the entire eastern continental part opposite the Sakhalin. The same term was used in reference to the entire trade chain — the *Santan Trade* — as also confirmed by the account of the Japanese traveler Mogami Tokunai (Zolotarev 1939: 19).

As we have seen, the Nivkh appear on Harrison's list under the familiar name *Gilyak*. Who, then, is hiding behind the ethnonym *Santan* or *Santa*? We may assume that this term referred to all Amur trade participants, who were represented by the ancestors of the modern Amur Nivkh, Ulcha and Oroch. The use of the term *Santa* in relation to several different ethnic groups is confirmed by the data of B. O. Pilsudski. Working with the Ainu in the settlement of Korsakovski, he reported that there he met three “Olcha” (Manguns) from the Amur, who called themselves *Nani*, whereas the Ainu called them *Syanta*. These Olcha (= Ulcha) came to the south of Sakhalin from Mariinsk with Russian traders to buy furs (cited after Startsev 2015: 18). It seems that of all the local peoples, the Ulcha were most actively engaged in the Santan Trace, though the Nivkh and the Oroch were also involved.

Another name for the Amur Nivkh, namely *Sumer-en-kuru*, is mentioned in (Sasaki 1999: 86). This term, which is apparently of Ainu origin, comprises the element *kuru* with the meaning ‘people’ and the suffix *-en* (= *-un*), presumably with a genitival (or localizing) meaning. The origin of the element *sumer* remains unknown. According to the data from (Shiraishi and Tangiku 2022), the Ainu did not have a single name for the Nivkh but used separate ethnonyms for the different local groups.

As for the endonyms of the Nivkh, the Nivkh have never identified themselves as “*Gilyak*”. This exonym remained alien for the Nivkh people for the entire time of its use (Taksami 1967: 6). The modern ethnonym *Nivkh* (Russian *nivx*) is based on Amur Nivkh appellative noun *nivx*, which means simply ‘man, person’. This is, however, only the Amur Nivkh form of the word, for in East Sakhalin Nivkh it has the form *niyvŋ*. The corresponding plural forms are *nivygu* (Amur Nivkh) and *niyvŋgun* (East Sakhalin Nivkh). When the Nivkh refer more specifically to their own ethnic group, as opposed to other peoples, they add the first person plural inclusive pronoun: *mer nivygu* (Amur Nivkh) or *men niyvŋgun* (East Sakhalin Nivkh) ‘our (own) people’. Non-Nivkh people are called, correspondingly, *ena nivygu* (Amur Nivkh) or *ena niyvŋgun* (East Sakhalin Nivkh) ‘other people’, or also *ena q^halygun* (East Sakhalin Nivkh) ‘people of another tribe’. Interestingly, V. Z. Panfilov (1970: 120) notes that in the Nivkh language the interrogative pronoun *nud?* ‘who?’ is only used with “true” Nivkh, while the question word for non-Nivkh people is *sij?* ‘what?’, coinciding with the general interrogative pronoun for inanimate objects.

Shternberg (1900: 410–411) gives the self-appellation of the Nivkh in the form of *niyǝvǝŋ* (нигывыŋ) and explains that it includes two lexical roots, viz. *ni* ‘I’ and *vo / wo* ‘village’, and the participial suffix *-ǝŋ*. Thus, he assumes that *niyǝvǝŋ* is formed from the form **nivoǝŋ* and has the meaning ‘(someone) living in my village, local (person)’. According to Shternberg, the process of derivation **nivoǝŋ > niyǝvǝŋ* was accompanied by the loss of a vowel *o* before the following vowel *ǝ* and the addition of a fricative *y* and a vowel *ǝ* to the lexeme. Panfilov (1970: 121–126) quite rightly criticizes this

etymology, noting the inaccuracies and irregularities of the described sound changes. He offers his own version of the origin of the Nivkh endonym, which, however, also raises serious doubts.

As Panfilov believes, the self-designation of the Nivkh historically had the form *ни҃҃҃҃* (*ни҃҃҃҃*), which goes back to the combination of the personal pronoun *ни* 'I' in the function of the possessive prefix 'my' and the lexeme *тун҃҃ / рун҃҃*, which means 'brothers and sisters of all degrees of kinship' (Shternberg 1933: 137–138): *ни҃҃҃҃* < **нирун҃҃*. Panfilov explains the change **r* > *γ* by the phonetic features of these sounds, which, as was shown by the experimental study of (Zinder and Matusevich 1937: 118–119), can be pronounced both as fricatives and trills. Let us note, however, that no other word in Nivkh demonstrates such a sound change. As additional evidence, Panfilov cites the verb *ирл҃҃* 'to pull, pull out (something)', which has the bound variants *т^hл҃҃*, *к^hл҃҃* and *xl҃҃*. According to him, this variation proves that the sound *r* (in *ирл҃҃*) can alternate with *x* (in *xl҃҃*). He implicitly assumes that the direction of historical development was **r* > *x*. This assumption is incorrect; however, for the voiced trill *r* in *ирл҃҃* is the result of voicing of a voiceless trill *r̥* in the position between the vowel and the sonant. The voiceless trill *r̥*, in turn, is the result of spirantization of the aspirated plosive *t^h* in intervocalic position. This change occurred after the pronominal prefix *i-* had been added to the verb root *т^hл҃҃* < **t^hVL҃҃*: *ирл҃҃* < **i-r̥л҃҃* < **i-r̥^oVL҃҃* < **i-t^hVL҃҃*. Following the same scenario, the variant *xl҃҃* goes back to *к^hл҃҃* < **k^hVL҃҃*: *xl҃҃* < **i-xl҃҃* < **i-xVL҃҃* < **i-k^hVL҃҃*. The forms *т^hл҃҃* and *к^hл҃҃* are in some varieties in free variation, similarly to words such as *т^hловр̥* ~ *к^hловр̥* 'nail', *т^hлојд* ~ *к^hлојд* 'to run', *т^hл̥* ~ *к^hл̥* 'thimble', *т^hл̥* ~ *к^hл̥* 'sky'. Thus, it is impossible to speak of any historical change **r* > *x*, even less about a development **r* > *γ*.

Basing on the regular sound changes that took place in Nivkh, the historical form of the endonym should be reconstructed as **никәрә҃҃*. This form has undergone a number of historical changes, including the spirantization of the stops **k* > *γ* and **p* > *v* in intervocalic position and the loss of the vowels in the last and penultimate syllables: **никәрә҃҃* > **ни҃҃әвә҃҃* > *ни҃҃҃҃*. The Amur varieties are characterized by an additional loss of the final nasal consonant and the metathesis of the consonants *γ* and *v*. Since at the end of a word fricatives are always realized as voiceless, in these varieties the endonym acquired a form with a final voiceless sound: *ни҃҃҃҃* > **ни҃҃҃҃* > **ни҃҃҃* > *ни҃҃҃*. The polysyllabicity of the original form suggests that it includes more than one morpheme, which, in fact, both Shternberg and Panfilov sought to prove. Tentatively, it could be assumed that this word is a nominalized form derived with the suffix *-҃҃* from some verb. All other assumptions based on the internal reconstruction of the endonym still remain at the level of speculations.

Kreinovich (1955: 161) compares the words *ни҃҃҃҃* and *ни҃҃҃* with the Nanai word *nai* = Ulcha *ни* 'man, person, human being', Manchu *ни҃҃҃*. This comparison involves, however, phonological problems, for the original form of the Tungusic word may be reconstructed as **ни҃҃* (cf. Tsintsius 1975: 598–599).

In official use, the term *Nivkh* replaced *Gilyak* in the Soviet Union in the 1930s. As we can see, it is based on the Amur form of the appellative noun meaning 'man, person'. The choice of the Amur variant as the official name was apparently connected with the fact that at that time only the Amur variety was used as a literary language. A literary norm for East Sakhalin Nivkh, whose speakers identify themselves as *Nighvng*

(*niyvŋ*) was first developed only in the 1970s. At the same time, in the spoken languages both *niyvŋ* and *niyx* have been preserved as dialectal forms of the modern endonym.

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