

STERNBERG'S MATERIALS ON THE SEXUAL LIFE OF THE GILYAK

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INTRODUCTORY NOTE

Waldemar Bogoras and Waldemar Jochelson are familiar figures to American anthropologists, especially to those interested in the northern regions, but the third member of the "Big Three" of Russian anthropology during the first decades of the 20th century, Leo Sternberg (Lev Shternberg in the Russian form), is very little known in this country, largely because none of his major works have been available in English. Like the first two, Sternberg was a political exile in Siberia—in this case among the Gilyak on Sakhalin and on the Amur, whom he came to know intimately. He is our most important source on their social life and religion—these being the aspects of culture that most interested him, to the virtual exclusion of the remainder. Sternberg, it should be noted, was an enthusiastic disciple of Lewis H. Morgan, and his interpretations must be viewed today with this in mind.

Although Sternberg was never associated with the Jesup North Pacific Expedition, as were Bogoras and Jochelson, a major monograph of his on the Gilyak was to be published in translation in the expedition's reports in order to complete the coverage of the "Palaeo-Asiatic" tribes of eastern Siberia. According to the late Professor Robert H. Lowie, the task of translation was entrusted by Franz Boas to Alexander Goldenweiser. However, this projected volume never reached print, and our picture of the "Palaeo-Asiatics" has accordingly remained incomplete.

Sternberg later expanded certain sections of his Gilyak monograph into a separate work, *The Social Organization of the Gilyak*, which was published posthumously in the volume of Sternberg's collected works entitled *Giliaki, Orochi, Gol'dy, Negidal'tsy, Ainy* (Dal'giz, Khabarovsk, 1933)—a volume which is a bibliographic rarity in this country. The chapter (XI) of *The Social Organization of the Gilyak* devoted to the sexual life of this group is perhaps the best of Sternberg's first-hand ethnographic reports. Following a suggestion made to me some years ago by Professor Lowie, my translation of this chapter is herewith offered to a wider audience.

SEXUAL LIFE OF THE GILYAK

The norms of group marriage which afford the Gilyak such wide freedom of sexual intercourse must in themselves promote an excessive development of sexual sensualism. And the customary mode of life of this people, in turn, only contributes to this development. The chief occupation of the Gilyak—fishing—leaves them far too much leisure, while on the other hand the only occupation which could provide an adequate outlet

for their emotional energy—hunting—plays a comparatively insignificant role in Gilyak life. They do not undertake distant hunting expeditions, while the seasonal pursuit of sables, squirrels, foxes and deer—and even the sporadic excursions after the rather mild-tempered local bear—represent nothing particularly dangerous. The art of hunting therefore receives little attention: one sees very few ardent hunters among the Gilyak, in marked contrast to the neighboring Tungus. Nor are the Gilyak familiar with the heroic emotions of war—especially during the past fifty years (i.e. since 1850); and even in former times what they refer to as “war” actually consisted of sporadic clan disputes over revenge or, more often, over women. The Gilyak have never known warfare as a profession, or as the favorite occupation of youth.

It is natural that their emotional energy should be directed chiefly toward sex. The Gilyak begin their sexual life with the onset of puberty, and all their leisure, all their thoughts, they devote to women. This is aggravated by the fact that by no means everyone has the opportunity to contract an actual marriage. An unmarried youth does not content himself with just the women to whom he has access in his own village; nor does he confine himself to the group of women over whom he has legal rights. In fact, the only ones he leaves alone are those in the category that is forbidden to him. When it is a question of romantic adventure, the Gilyak male is deterred neither by time nor distance, as long as there is the possibility of finding a little more female companionship. Most readily of all, of course, a young man will set out for the village where his fathers-in-law live—but he has no objection to journeying to a quite alien community. During my travels young people often voluntarily joined me, offering their services gratis over a period of many weeks; and this was done in the hope of finding opportunities for romantic adventures—not a very difficult feat. Due to the traditional hospitality of the Gilyak, and their craving for any sort of news, the doors of every house are opened wide to any visitor. As a consequence, a Gilyak feels himself at home everywhere. Within a few hours after his arrival in a village he will already have succeeded in visiting every house, relating his news—to which both men and women lend an equally avid ear—while at the same time sizing up any particular woman who may catch his fancy. The rest is a matter of his erotic skill and experience. It is true that, to all appearances, the Gilyak woman conducts herself in an unapproachable manner. Upon the appearance of a strange man she will lower her eyes, remain seated all of the time, frowning, and scarcely replying to the stranger's questions. But this is only an exterior pretense that conceals her inner lust. Unnoticed by the bystanders, she is throwing inquisitive sidelong glances at the new man, which are caught up by him at opportune moments. And if the guest produces a proper impression, the affair is apt to be concluded rather rapidly. The man will track her down at the well, or while berry-picking, or will simply seize her in the entrance passage; whereupon, after a brief symbolic dialogue on the

order of "Let's have a smoke together" (i.e. taking turns having a puff of the same pipe), or "Let me tell you the news", the matter will be settled very readily. Sometimes the visitor will simply remain in the house of his inamorata and, during the night, will cross over to her bed—or vice versa. On other occasions the affair will dispense with words and confine itself to symbolic acts such as touching the breasts or pinching the leg; and if these approaches encounter no rebuff, the consent of the woman is thereby secured. It is interesting to note that the symbolism employed in such erotic propositions is reminiscent of the rituals of the marriage ceremony. For instance, the suggestion of having a smoke together is a facetious imitation of one of the rites. And while pinching the leg or breasts does not figure in marriage ceremonies at the present time among the Gilyak, it is met with even today among certain peoples of North America—for instance among the Lillooet Indians, according to the testimony of Boas and Teit.

Not only the unmarried youths but even elderly married Gilyaks allow themselves freedom of this type in strange villages. Among my fellow travelers on one of my first journeys was a venerable old man, Gibel'ka, who enjoyed wide renown all over Sakhalin owing to his wealth and his remarkable intellect. During halts at villages he would speak jokingly about the local belles just like his young companions, and one day he became carried away to the extent of consulting me as to whether or not he should purchase a particular beauty who had caught his fancy and take her back home—even though he had been married for a long time and could not say enough in praise of his wife. Although it is true that he did not participate in the nocturnal adventures of his young fellow travelers, this was only because the competition was already too hot, having almost reached the point of gun play.

In view of the relative accessibility of women, violent behavior towards them is rare. But I chanced to hear about such cases occurring at seasons when the women repair for several days to places remote from the settlements in order to gather berries and roots. In these instances gangs of youths had carried out actual raids on the defenseless women, not hesitating to employ force if they did not submit voluntarily. However, the actual violence chiefly involved tearing off the breeches (which are made without any opening, as among the Chukchi and Koryak). Expeditions of this type, as indeed the general run of romantic quests outside of one's own kinship circle, are characteristically referred to by a term meaning "to hunt for women". However, this term is also applied to quests for brides, since it has two meanings: to hunt, and also to look for someone or something in general.

Special expeditions to distant strange villages in quest of women are exceptional sporting propositions, so to speak—especially since in distant villages visitors ordinarily meet with strong competition from the local

youths. And since the women already have their established lovers—to say nothing of husbands—special qualities are needed if a man is to achieve easy success in strange regions. I succeeded in meeting such fortunate individuals: they were usually sophisticated story-tellers, good jesters and singers. Such distinguished connoisseurs are not numerous among the Gilyak, however; there is even a special term for them. Ordinarily, a single youth contents himself with the women of his own settlement, or goes visiting to the settlements of his fathers-in-law where a very cordial reception awaits him.

It is very difficult to generalize a picture of the sexual nature of the Gilyak. It is first of all necessary to distinguish married from single people. The former, as long as they remain in their home settlement, are more apt to be preoccupied with guarding their wife from strangers than with initiating extra-marital flirtations. Only when on a journey or while visiting in other settlements do they readily give free rein to their sexual instincts. On the other hand, married women are surrounded by so many temptations in the form of their group husbands and visitors that they readily violate conjugal fidelity at every convenient opportunity—all the more so since many of them are not married for love or to a person of their own age, and hence willingly recoup themselves with extra-marital flirtations. However, from the viewpoint of Gilyak attitudes on decorum, such flirtations represent nothing abnormal, since the greater part of them take place between group husbands and wives. Rightly or wrongly one must award the palm to the women when it comes to excesses among married persons. "With men," say the Gilyak, "one to one is still found good; with women, not just one."

Actual excesses of debauchery do take place among unmarried young people. Here we find such extravagances as the case of the girl Pigunajko who before her marriage was simultaneously engaged in liaisons with fourteen lovers, including her future husband. Or one can cite an example from the Gilyak epos, in which the hero comes to the house of a certain old man to seek a wife. His future father-in-law says to him, "Your wife lives over there in the little hut. People have been coming to her and copulating continually with her; as a consequence she has lost her legs." The bridegroom, however, is not in the least indignant at this disclosure. "What of it?" he replies, "I'll take her away as she is."—evidently not seeing anything peculiar in the situation.

However this sort of thing does not reflect the general picture. Along with the factors of heightened sexuality and sexual capacity there are other restraining factors in operation. Among married women such factors include motherhood and household cares; and finally, among both married and unmarried, there are such feelings as love and modesty. But in general, sexual debauchery plays a not insignificant role in the life of the Gilyak, having both economic and psychic consequences. Ordinarily, the gay

young blades either do not set up a household at all or, if they do, they manage it very negligently. Both in everyday life and in folk-lore one constantly encounters the sharp reproaches and invective of the elders towards the youth for their laziness which stems from this debauchery. Moreover, the Gilyak themselves explain childless marriages on the grounds of debauchery. But most unfortunate of all is the effect of this behavior on the psyche. There is a whole series of nervous ailments specific for the Gilyak, such as *miarechenie* among men and illnesses associated with complete loss of psychic self-control among women, which are the result of debauchery. In the case of women, moreover, these are accompanied by serious transgressions in the area of sexual behavior which in their turn induce phenomena of hysteria.

But along with this extreme sexuality and sexual freedom which we have described, the feeling of love still plays a major role in Gilyak life. The term most widely used for love means both sexual love and the sentiment of love in general towards children, friends, etc. There is a special term for reciprocal love—marriage for love. There are also certain other terms for love, but there are no special words for lover or sweetheart, although one can say “a man whom they love”. In the language of lovers the beloved is called either by the terms “husband” or “wife”, or else by words which mean “my man” or “my woman”. The Gilyak themselves consider love as a normal stage in life through which everyone must pass in their youth. This feeling is very well expressed in a song which I recorded on the Amur, in which a girl complains about her mother's lack of sympathy towards her passion: “Mother, mother, mother dear—perhaps you have forgotten your own youth.”

Parents, however, never reproach their children for these amorous passions. And if young people at times have to listen to the grumbling of their elders, this is most often for purely economic reasons, since in the period of youthful passions people neglect their work and become negligent and untidy. In general, it is inconceivable that parents should react in any way to the sexual activities of their children—even of girls. If a father (or brother) finds out about the fornication of his daughter (or sister), he not only is debarred from using forceful measures against the seducer but may not even challenge him to a duel. One may not even show anger towards a daughter. The amorous passions of children are treated as though they were a completely natural phenomenon. And mothers in particular frequently even serve as agents in the secret love affairs of their children. In many of the songs which I recorded on the Amur, sons are continually addressing their mothers, talking over their amatory worries or asking advice as to where and how to find a sweetheart. Only the cases of love for a person who is in a forbidden category encounter serious and even relentless opposition from parents, who themselves will prompt a daughter to commit suicide. Or a relentless attitude, chiefly on the part

of the father, will be manifested on occasions when love threatens to upset an advantageous marriage contract concluded in childhood; then the girl will forcibly be handed over to the unloved husband. But these are exceptional cases.

The nature of love among the Gilyak does not differ in any way from that of love in civilized society. Coarse sexuality is quite lacking. In fact, in the concept of love among this primitive people we find the entire gamut of this universal human feeling, from the tenderest tones of poetic sentimentality and gentle yearning to the most tempestuous transports of heroic passion undaunted by any obstacle and not hesitating in the resolve to part with life itself.

This psyche of the Gilyak is reflected very well in their love songs, especially in the songs of women. Nature has endowed the Gilyak woman with a depth and delicacy of feeling which she knows how to express in ways and forms: "Night and day I think of you. . . . Like a mother feels for her own. . . . If you go away, I will think only of you; where you have gone, there will I also go. From the well from which we drank together, I will drink you dark shadow. Just as we like the tallest tree in a grove best of all, so you are the best of all people, the most beautiful. Oh, take me with you! I want to become the pouch that hangs on your belt, the bottom of your boat, so that I may be with you. Tears from my left eye fall like rain, my right knee grows weak, becomes motionless; everything is wasting away, my legs no longer move. . . ." Here in these expressions, which I have taken at random from various Gilyak love songs, a woman expresses her love. But even in the songs of men it is remarkable how the same sentimental notes are sounded, how frequent are the references to tears pattering like rain on the knees, the same yearnings over parting, the same sweet daydreams about reunion; and such emotional expressions as "I fell completely in love with you." Only now and then we find breaking through this such crudities as "The joint under the knee of your plump thigh twitches—oh, how I like it!" But never any cynicism.

One may assess the role of love in the life of the Gilyak by the abundance of such song materials. Not every person can relate stories or poems, but everyone knows love songs. And in the love of this people songs play an outstanding part. Songs are the language of lovers. During a rendezvous, lovers sing improvised songs to one another instead of conversing; and if they have no opportunity to meet, they will send songs composed for the occasion through a third person. A special terminology for songs of this kind has even been developed.

We can judge about the intensity of love among the Gilyak by the way in which lovers react in those cases where they encounter insurmountable obstacles. In such instances, suicide is the way out. Obstacles to love are of two kinds. Mostly they are imposed by the parent who forcibly

marries off the woman either through cupidity or reluctance to violate an agreement of infant betrothal; or cases in which the woman is taken by force. In these situations suicides often occur quite a long time after the forced marriage. The woman will first of all attempt to save herself by fleeing from the unloved husband; but if this fails, suicide is the outcome. I can recall a typical case of this sort, in which a girl from the village of Nianivo had been given in marriage against her will. She abruptly ran away from her husband back to her father, who then gave her to her lover, having been tempted by receiving a second bride price from the latter. Her first husband did not become reconciled to this, and seized an opportunity to take her away by force. Six months later the unhappy woman hung herself. Cases are also known where women who escape from unloved husbands have killed the children begotten by the latter.

Men prefer to defend their right to love in a more active manner. Usually, with the help of their kinsmen, they will attempt to abduct the woman by force, nor will they balk at killing the husband of their beloved. One really outstanding instance of heroism in love I recorded in the same village of Nianivo. In my time the richest and most respected man of the local clan was a Gilyak by the name of Nyugun. In his younger years his sweetheart had been forcibly married to another man, whereupon Nyugun killed the latter, for which he was arrested and transported to Nikolaevsk. During this interval the woman's brother again married her against her will to another husband. Escaping from prison, Nyugun set off immediately for the village of his sweetheart. As he approached her house he tore off all his garments except the short pants of modesty, notwithstanding the wintry weather, and in this condition burst into the room, which was crowded with people, and so frightened those present by his stalwart appearance that no hand was raised when he led his sweetheart out and took her home—after which they lived peacefully together for many years.

The most tragic obstacle to love, however, is the status of the lovers in forbidden degrees of kinship. Here their plight is a permanent one, and the parents themselves insist on suicide. In such cases the lovers customarily set forth into the forest and hang themselves side by side on two trees. Before committing suicide they sing songs to each other about their journey into the world beyond the grave where none will oppose their love. Some of these songs have come down to us in the following fashion. It may happen that one of the participants, specifically the man, falls to the ground and after this loses his inclination to repeat the attempt. Such a person preserves for posterity the death song. One of these tragic cases of illegal love became a popular legend. It was a hundred years ago. A girl became involved in a liaison with the younger brother of her father, who shortly after went away on a long trading journey to Manchuria. She had in the meanwhile become pregnant, and when it was impossible to conceal the fact any longer, she committed suicide by hanging herself. When her lover returned, he burned all of the goods which he had brought on her grave,

turned loose the bear which he was fattening for the bear festival, and also hung himself. The song which the unfortunate woman sang at the moment of parting has been preserved. It begins: "Take me with you; I will be the planks in the bottom of your boat. . . . Now we must think only about the afterworld. If you would remember me, keep as a souvenir the catkins that hang on the wall. . . ."

To deal with unrequited love the Gilyak employ magical means. One method is to mix the dried brain of the cuckoo with tobacco and offer it to the girl to smoke. Or secretly sewing a cuckoo feather in her dress. But there are other remedies that are not so innocuous and which may lead to tragic consequences. They say that a person who has partaken of the drug from one of these potions falls into a deep melancholy and dies after a few days. I knew of two men, somewhat russified, who sold such drugs at an exorbitant price and had destroyed several women in this way.

Among the Gilyak, as in our own country, there are shy individuals who cannot bring themselves to make their avowal in person. In such cases old women serve as go-betweens, and for this service it is customary for them to receive "tea"—i.e. a present. At times some sort of a gift is sent through such go-betweens—usually cloth, in which they tie several knots to indicate the number of days until the admirer will come to a rendezvous.

We have yet to speak about the stimuli to love among the Gilyak: what personal traits attract them to the beloved. First of all, of course, there is the aesthetic aspect: beauty, in particular facial beauty. The concept of "beautiful" in the Gilyak language is expressed by the term meaning literally "a good face". It is noteworthy that they appraise beauty not only from their own racial viewpoint. Both men and women like Russian women, and Gilyak women like even those types of European men which from their standpoint are most dissimilar, such as red-heads and blonds. Thus, for example, my friend Bronislaw Pilsudskii, a reddish blond, enjoyed great admiration among the Gilyak not only for his sympathetic attitude towards them, but merely for his attractive personal appearance. They never described him excepting by the term meaning literally "beautiful face", and when he left Sakhalin the Gilyak women recited songs avowing their love to him on parting.

In their love songs they sing not only about facial beauty but also about "white skin like birch bark", luxurious hair (braids down to the loins, sleek hair), gracefulness of gait ("head inclined to one side, smiling he goes", "with long strides he goes"), physical strength, and stature ("legs penetrating into the ground up to the shins").

Of course elegance of clothing plays no small part in the aesthetic appraisal of the beloved. In the love songs we find mentioned (in the case of women) dress embroidered with finery, an abundance of copper bangles,

etc., or (in the case of men) coats of black dog skins, skirts of variegated sealskin, rich facings of small squirrel pelts, etc. The most beautiful summer costume for a woman is a black dress; men show to best advantage in shirts made half of red and half of white or blue material.

But in addition to external appearance, moral qualities are also prized. The features in men which attract women are manliness, reliability ("your voice is like the voice of a respectable man"), or the talents of the conversationalist, the jester and the singer. In women, apart from outward appearance, men are attracted by the traits of femininity which the Gilyak women possess to a great degree—both by nature and through early training. In early childhood a girl is already training herself to speak with quiet melodious voice and to give her face a dreamy coquettish expression. A woman should also have considerable singing talent. By means of their songs the women not only know how to subtly express their love but also how to mischievously ridicule unwanted admirers. Their sarcasm makes free use of hyperbole of every sort. One song compares the nose of the undesirable person to a breathing hole in the ice and to an open door, while his clothing, dog team, harness, etc. are described in a similar vein.

On many occasions I questioned the Gilyak as to whether such sexual perversions as male homosexuality and bestiality were practiced among them. It turned out that no one had ever heard of any instances of homosexuality. A single case of bestiality was recalled, and this with repugnance. It involved one psychically-ill man in a village on the Tym River who copulated with a dog. The general attitude of the Gilyak towards these perversions is clearly evident from the following legend which I recorded:

"The tiger, the snow leopard and even the lion (?) were formerly humans. Once upon a time the god Kur noticed by chance that they were copulating via the anus; whereupon he said in indignation: 'But, once you copulate like beasts, you will remain beasts forevermore'."

Thus it is the feeling of the Gilyak that such perversions are acts which liken a man to a beast.

The attitude of the Gilyak toward hermaphrodites is quite simple: they evidently view it merely as an anomaly and nothing to be abhorred at all. They readily have sexual intercourse with such individuals, and the marriage of hermaphrodites is a customary phenomenon. In view of the fact that intercourse and marriage on the part of hermaphrodites are often confused with homosexuality in the ethnographic literature, I shall adduce some very typical instances of hermaphroditism known to me among the Gilyak.

On Sakhalin I knew of two cases. In the village of Yamy near Alexandrovsk there was an old man named Chubuk who was known by every-

one as a hermaphrodite since up to a certain age he had considered himself a woman (his penis was poorly developed) and had worn women's clothing. Later on his penis attained normal development, he began to dress like a man and ultimately got married. The other case was recorded by me in the village of Myi Gyrk on the western coast of the northern tip of the island. Here I encountered one day two young people sitting on the shore, a man and a woman, who proved to be a married couple. I was immediately struck by the fact that the woman's face seemed like that of a man. My fellow travelers explained that a year previous she had worn men's clothing, considered herself a man and was on very friendly terms as such with her present husband. One day they went fishing and were forced to spend the night together, and it was on this occasion that the hermaphrodite's secret was revealed. Thenceforth they began sleeping together and ended up by getting married—although people had tried hard to talk the young man out of taking this step. Similar cases can readily serve as the basis for legends about transformed people (werewolves, etc.).

On the Amur a Gilyak named Putuk related to me some interesting details about a hermaphrodite friend. The latter up to a certain age had been a girl, but suddenly she noticed that a penis was developing on her: it waxed and waned and then completely disappeared again. She had informed her boy friend about this phenomenon, and he had stolen in at night and convinced himself of the truth of her statements; the next day he told everybody about it. After several more years this person grew a beard and the penis finally developed—although there was also a fully-developed vagina so that it was possible to have intercourse with men. From this time on the person began to dress in men's clothing, soon got married and now is the foremost hunter in the district. He lives normally with his wife but sometimes copulates with men, and considers the latter more pleasurable. He remarks about himself with satisfaction, "I have two chances, two happinesses."

In all, I could count up to five such instances among the Gilyak—as many as Bogoras found among the Chukchi.

The Gilyak have no special ceremonies connected with the attainment of sexual maturity. The sole external indication of girls who have reached puberty is the fact that they begin to wear their hair in two braids. Girls consider the appearance of menstruation—which usually occurs in the thirteenth to fourteenth year—as the moment of reaching sexual maturity, and this is considered as the beginning of marriageable age. Properly speaking, however, the expression "a woman who has noticed her body" serves as the term for a woman who has attained sexual maturity—i.e. a woman whose breasts have developed sufficiently so as to be noticeable. A similar term exists for men—"a man who has noticed his body"—but in this case the word "body" is understood to mean a moustache.

Even before the onset of menstruation mothers prepare their daughters for the impending change in their lives, and instruct them in all the necessary observances and prohibitions towards persons related by blood. The Gilyak of both sexes are fully aware of the significance of menstruation as signalling the moment of sexual maturity, and do not allow themselves any acts of sexual intercourse prior to this. Adult men, it is true, often marry immature girls and sleep under the same blanket with them right from the start, but intercourse begins only at such time as the wife informs her husband of the onset of her first menstruation.

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Not for Resale