

American Anthropologist

NEW SERIES

VOL. 6

JULY-SEPTEMBER, 1904

No. 4

THE MYTHOLOGY OF THE KORYAK¹

By WALDEMAR JOCHELSON

All the peoples of Siberia, central Asia, and northeastern Europe whose languages are not of Aryan or Semitic origin, speak Ural-Altai languages. This group, which contains about fifty peoples and tribes, consists of five branches, the Mongolian proper, the Tungus, the Turk, the Samoyed, and the Finn. The group was established and its branches were classified on the basis of linguistic indications, that is, on the similarity in the phonetics and morphology of the languages, by the Finnish investigator Castren, whose researches were conducted some sixty years ago. Anthropological and ethnological investigations subsequently confirmed this classification.

However, there is a small group of tribes in northeastern Siberia which cannot be classed as belonging to the Ural-Altai family, for in spite of the fact that until recently this group has been investigated but little, Steller's work on the Kamchadal, written in the middle of the eighteenth century² and remarkable for its time, and occasional records of various travelers on the languages and life of other tribes, point to the fact that this group cannot be classed among the family mentioned, but that it stands alone. The group includes the Ostyak and Kot on the Yenisei; the Gilyak and Ainu at the mouth of the Amur river, on the island of Saghalin, and

¹ Read at the meeting of the American Ethnological Society, New York, March 21, 1904. Published by permission of the American Museum of Natural History.

² Georg Wilhelm Steller, *Beschreibung von dem Lande Kamtschatka dessen Einwohnern, deren Sitten, Nahmen Lebensart und Verschiedenen Gewohnheiten*, Frankfurt und Leipzig, 1774.

partly in Japan; and the Kamchadal, Koryak, Chukchee, and Yukaghir in extreme northeastern Siberia.

Ethnologists have designated the tribes of this isolated group as either "palæasiatics" or "hyperboreans"; but these names, invented for purposes of classification, have no intrinsic meaning. At best they may answer as geographical, but by no means as ethnological, terms.

It is not, therefore, without reason that Peschel, the well-known German ethnologist, calls these tribes "North Asiatics of indefinite relationship." He says: "The question in this part is not of giving a description of a new group within the Mongolian branch of the human race, but of making the frank confession that our scientific structure will have to be handed down in an incomplete state."¹

The study of these tribes, the necessity of which was long recognized by Russian ethnologists, was commenced under the so-called "Yakut Expedition," in which the present writer participated,² and at the same time the Jesup Expedition of the American Museum of Natural History undertook similar researches among them. The work of the latter expedition was based on the probability that in the remote past there existed some connection between the cultures and types of the Old and the New Worlds, and that for an understanding of the history of the American tribes it is indispensable to determine this connection. Therefore the attention of the expedition was directed, first of all, to the northern coasts of the Pacific, the geographical and geological conditions of which must have facilitated intercourse between the tribes and helped their migrations from one continent to the other.

For this reason the investigation of the Koryak was included in the plans of the expedition.³ The results of this investigation have shown that the original hypothesis with reference to the kinship of culture of the isolated Siberian tribes with the American aborigines has been fully confirmed, and that the Koryak are to be regarded as one of the Asiatic tribes which stand nearest to the American Indian. I intend to confine myself in this paper to a

¹ Oscar Peschel, *Völkerkunde*, Leipzig, 1876, p. 413.

² The Yakut Expedition (1894-1897) was fitted out by the Imperial Russian Geographical Society at the expense of Mr I. M. Sibiryakoff.

³ The study of the Koryak was intrusted by the Jesup Expedition to the author and was conducted in 1900-01.

consideration of the similarities in the beliefs and myths of the Koryak and the American tribes. It will be necessary, however, to make a few preliminary remarks on the geographical distribution of the Koryak. Their territory is bounded by the Pacific ocean on the east, by the Stanovoi mountain range on the west, by the Palpal range on the north, and by the bays of the Okhotsk sea on the south. The climate of the country is one of the severest on earth ; but there is a difference between the climate of the interior and that of the strip of land along the coast. At the beginning of April, when I left the coast of Peshina bay, the temperature was 27° above zero ; a day later, eighty miles inland, the thermometer registered 38° below zero. But the interior experiences quite a few warm days during summer, when the temperature sometimes rises to 70° and even higher, while the strip along the coast seldom enjoys temperature higher than 50° . Moreover, the winds and storms that rage along the coast make even a slight cold unbearable. My anemometer frequently registered wind-velocities of 10 to 20 meters per second, or 22.5 to 45 miles per hour ; and once, in November, while I was at the settlement of Kamenskoye, a gale raged with a velocity of 22 meters per second, or about 68 miles per hour. I went outside to make a meteorological observation, and when but a few paces from my house, I lost sight of it, owing to the drifting snow, and had it not been for the assistance of my Cossack, I should have been unable to find my way back.

It must be clear that in such a climate agriculture is impossible ; hence the inhabitants depend for their subsistence on fish, sea-mammals, and reindeer, supplemented by edible roots and berries. According to the source of their means of maintenance, the Koryak are divided into Reindeer Koryak (who, with their herds of domestic reindeer, wander over the interior of the country) and Maritime Koryak (who live in settlements along the coast).

In our investigations of all the features of Koryak life we meet with three elements — the Indian, Eskimo, and Mongol-Turk, the first generally predominating. This is particularly true with reference to their religious concepts, for the Koryak view of nature coincides in many points with that of the Indians of the north Pacific coast. Their cosmogony is not developed, and in their tales about heroes

and deities they assume that the world existed before them. We find here the tale of the Raven Stealing the Sun, and that of the Sun's Release by the Raven. The universe consists of a series of five worlds, one above the other, the middle one being our earth. The same conception is found among the Bellacoola Indians.

There is a well-known series of myths, especially developed among the Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian, in which the raven is recognized as the organizer of the universe. The Koryak myths resemble this series closely; indeed almost their entire mythology is confined to raven stories. Of the hundred and forty recorded myths there are only nine in which the mythical raven or his children are not mentioned.

The mythical raven, or Big-Raven (*Quikinnáqu*), of the Koryak appears also as organizer of the universe. He is the first man, and at the same time the ancestor of the Koryak. The manner of his appearance on earth has not been made quite clear. According to some tales, the Supreme Being, of whom I shall speak later, created him; according to others, he created himself; while a third version asserts that he was left by his parents when quite small, and grew up alone into a powerful man. His wife is sometimes considered to be the daughter of the Supreme Being, sometimes the daughter of the sea-god who has the appearance of a spider-crab (*Toyókoto* or *Avvi*).

At the time of Big-Raven, or during the mythological age, all objects on earth could turn into men, and vice versa. There were no real men then, and Big-Raven lived with animals, and apparently with inanimate objects and phenomena of nature, as though they were men. He was able to transform himself into a raven by putting on a raven coat, and to resume the shape of man at will. His children married or were given in marriage to animals, such as seals, dogs, wolves, mice; or phenomena of nature, as the wind, a cloud (or Wind-man, Cloud-man); or luminaries, like the Moon-man, Star-man; or inanimate objects, such as the Stone-men, trees, a stick, or plants. Men were born from these unions.

When Big-Raven was no more, the transformation of objects from one form to another ceased to take place, and a clear line distinguishing men from other beings was established. Big-Raven left

the human race suddenly, because, it is said, they would not follow his teachings; and it is not known what became of him. According to some indications his abode is in the zenith.

Big-Raven gave light to men; he taught them how to hunt sea and land animals; he also gave them reindeer, made the fire-drill, gave them the drum, left incantations for amulets, and set up shamans to struggle with the evil spirits, with whom Big-Raven himself had carried on a constant and successful warfare. He is invisibly present at every shamanistic performance; and the incantations are dramatized stories telling how Big-Raven is treating his sick son or daughter, the male or female patients impersonating his children.

Big-Raven is regarded as the assistant of the Supreme Being, whom he helped to establish order in the universe. In the myths and tales the Supreme Being is called Universe or World (*Naiñmen*), or Supervisor (*Ináhtelaⁿ*); in other cases he is called Master-of-the-Upper-World (*Giçhol-Eti'nvilaⁿ*), or simply The-One-on-High (*Gi'çholaⁿ*), Master (*Étm*), Existence, Being, or Strength (*Yaçhi'čñm*, *Vahi'čñm*, or *Vahi'vñm*), or Dawn (*Tñárgin*). In some instances he is referred to as Sun (*Tiykitiy*) or Thunder-Man (*Kihígilaⁿ*). Although these names translated into a civilized language may seem to indicate abstract conceptions, they appear to the Koryak mind in a crude, material, anthropomorphic form.

The Supreme Being is represented as an old man living with his family in a settlement of the Upper World, in heaven; and he keeps order on earth. If he wishes to punish men for their transgression of taboos, or for their failure to offer the required sacrifices, he goes to sleep, when the regular course of events on earth comes to a standstill, hunting becomes unsuccessful, and people suffer starvation and other disaster. The Supreme Being, however, does not long bear ill-will, and he may be very easily propitiated. He is, as a rule, rather inert.

The so-called *kaláu* (plural of *kála*) beings that are hostile to man, display much more activity. At the time of Big-Raven, or during the mythological age, they used to assault man openly, and they usually figure in myths as ordinary cannibals. Big-Raven overcame them frequently, but after Big-Raven's departure they

became invisible, and they now shoot man with invisible arrows, catch him with invisible nets, and strike him with invisible axes. Every disease and every death is the result of an attack of these unseen evil spirits. The Supreme Being seldom comes to the assistance of men in this deadly and unequal struggle; man is left to his own resources, and his only means of protection are the incantations bequeathed to him by Big-Raven, charmed amulets and guardians, performances of shamans who act with the help of their guardian spirits called by the Koryak *eñen*, and the offerings of dogs and reindeer as sacrifices to the spirits. Every family is in possession of a certain number of incantations, which pass from father to child as heirlooms and constitute a family secret.

While the Supreme Being is a tribal deity and Big-Raven the common Koryak ancestor, all the guardians are either family or individual protectors. In only one case does a guardian, which has the form of a pointed post and which may well be called an idol, appear as a guardian and master of an entire village.

Crude representations of animals or men carved of wood serve as guardians or amulets. Parts of animals (like hair, the beak, the nose, or a portion of an ear), which are used in place of the whole animal, or inanimate objects (like beads, stones, etc.) serve the same purpose.

The reason why it is believed that objects insignificant in themselves may become means of guarding against misfortune and of curing disease, is primarily the animistic and at the same time the anthropomorphic view of nature held by the Koryak. According to this view not only are all things animate, but the vital principle concealed beneath the exterior visible shell is anthropomorphic. Furthermore, the incantation which must be pronounced over the object makes its vital principle powerful and directs it to a certain kind of activity — to the protection of the family or individual from evil spirits.

I will enumerate here the most important family and individual guardians:

1. The sacred fire-drill, which consists of a board shaped like a human body, a small bow, a drill, and other implements necessary for making fire. By means of this guardian, fire is produced for

religious ceremonies. The fire-board is the master of the hearth, but among the Reindeer Koryak it is at the same time the master of the herd. A few small wood-carvings, representing men, are attached to it; these are supposed to be its herdsman, and to help it in guarding the herd against wolves.

2. The drum, which is the master of the house.

3. A small figure of a man, called the "searching guardian"; it is sewed to the coats of little children for the purpose of guarding their souls. Children particularly are subject to attacks by evil spirits, and the children's inexperienced souls are apt to be frightened and to leave the body. On the "searching guardian" devolves the duty of catching the child's soul and of restoring it to its place.

All guardians are closely connected with the welfare of the household hearth; they cannot, therefore, be given to a strange family or carried into a strange house.

The sacrifices of the Koryak may be divided into bloody offerings, consisting of the bodies of slaughtered dogs and reindeer, and bloodless offerings, which are usually in the form of food, berries, sacrificial grass, ornaments, tobacco, and even whiskey. Bloody sacrifices are offered mostly to the Supreme Being, that he may not be diverted from keeping order on earth, and to his son, Cloud-man (*Yáhalan*), for his mediation in love-affairs. Cloud-man can inspire a girl with an inclination toward a young man, and vice versa. Bloody sacrifices are offered also to evil spirits, that they may not attack men.

The number of bloody sacrifices offered by the Koryak in the course of a year is quite large. Of the reindeer they sacrifice, they use at least the meat; but the killing of dogs cripples the domestic economy of the Maritime Koryak. It often happens that, toward winter, Koryak families are left without dog-teams. At one time I came to a settlement of twelve houses, and found there more than forty slaughtered dogs hanging on posts, with their noses pointing upward, a sign that the dogs had been offered to the Supreme Being, not to evil spirits. This was to me a most strange and distressing spectacle.

Bloodless offerings are made to the guardians, to sacred hills, to the "masters" of the sea and river, and to other spirits.

The cycle of yearly festivals is also connected with sacrifices. I will mention here only the most important festivals. Those of the Maritime Koryak are the whale festival, the hauling of the skin boat out of the sea in the autumn for the purpose of putting it away for the winter, and its launching in spring. The most important festivals of the Reindeer Koryak are : one in the autumn, on the occasion of the return of the herds from the summer pasture ; and another in spring, in connection with the fawning of the reindeer does.

All these are family festivals, except the whale festival, which in one sense may be regarded as a village celebration. Not only does the entire village participate in the festivities, but people from other settlements are invited. The celebration consists of two parts — the welcoming and the home-speeding of the whale. The killed whale is welcomed as an honored guest with burning firebrands, songs, and dances. The dancers are dressed in embroidered dance-coats. Thereupon the whale is entertained for several days, and then preparations are made to send it off on its return voyage. It is supplied with provisions, so that it may induce other whales, its relatives, also to visit the settlement.

The arrangement of festivals and religious ceremonies, and the preparation of guardians and amulets, incantations, and similar things pertaining to the family cult, are attended to by each family separately. The eldest member of the family usually acts as the priest of the family cult, while some female member acquires particular skill in the art of beating the drum and singing, and familiarizes herself with the formulæ of prayers and incantations. All this combined may be called "family shamanism" as distinguished from "professional shamanism."

A professional shaman is a man inspired by a particular kind of guardian spirits called *eñen*, by the help of which he treats patients, struggles with other shamans, and also causes injury to his enemies. Thus the activity of the professional shaman is outside the limits of the family cult, and a skilful shaman enjoys a popularity for hundreds of miles.

Shamans possessing the art of ventriloquism are endowed with particular power, for the Koryak believe that the voices which seem to emanate not from the shaman but from various parts of the house, are the voices of the spirits called up by the shaman.

The so-called "transformed" shamans are still more interesting. These are shamans who, according to the Koryak belief, have changed their sex by order of the spirits. A young man suddenly dons woman's clothes, begins to sew, cooks, and does other kinds of woman's housework. At the same time he is supposed to be physically transformed into a female. Such a shaman marries like a woman. However, a union of this kind leads only to the satisfaction of unnatural inclinations, which were formerly often found among the Koryak. Tales are current, according to which, in olden times, transformed shamans gave birth to children; indeed such occurrences are mentioned in some traditions recorded by me. On the other hand, the children of the "transformed" woman's husband, born to him by his real wife, frequently resemble the shaman. This institution, however, is now declining among the Koryak, although it still holds full sway among the Chukchee.

I wish to point out here another very interesting feature in the religious ceremonies of the Koryak. I refer to the wearing of masks. Grass masks are used by women during the whale festivals, while wooden masks are worn by young men in the fall of the year, for the purpose of driving away evil spirits. The Koryak do not attempt to give their masks animal forms, and in this respect they resemble those of the northern Alaska Eskimo.

In summing up my observations of the religious life of the Koryak, I have come to the conclusion that their views of nature closely resemble those of the Indians of the north Pacific coast; but we likewise find in their religion Asiatic, or rather Turkish-Mongolian, as well as Eskimo elements. It is difficult to say at what period the Koryak first came in contact with the Turkish-Mongolian tribes, or to what period may be ascribed their relations with the Eskimo, with whom they have no intercourse at present; but the fact that we find in Koryak religion and customs a good many features common to those tribes cannot be attributed solely to the influence of similar geographical conditions. The domesticated reindeer of the Koryak is a cultural acquisition of Asiatic origin; and with this factor are connected some religious ceremonies and customs — for instance, bloody sacrifices offered to deities and spirits. These are not found on the Pacific coast of America; but

they do occur east of the Rocky mountains, among tribes like the Iroquois and the Sioux, who kill dogs as sacrifices.

The particular customs connected with the celebration of successful whale-hunting, and their taboo with reference to sea-mammals (the meat of which must not be partaken by women after confinement, and which must not come in contact with dead bodies) are also found among the Aleut and the Eskimo. This similarity is especially interesting since the chief food of the Maritime Koryak, as well as of the Indians of the Pacific coast, does not consist of sea-mammals, but of fish; and berries and edible roots are used extensively by both.

Nothing shows more clearly the close similarity between the culture of the Koryak and that of the Indians of the north Pacific ocean than their mythology. While some religious customs and ceremonies may have been borrowed at a late period, myths usually reflect for a long time the state of mind of the remotest periods. True, we find Mongolian-Turk as well as Eskimo elements in the myths also; but not to any considerable degree. To the Mongolian-Turk elements belong the presence of the domestic reindeer in the myths, and, further, the magic objects and houses of iron, as well as the seas and mountains of fire; but in all other respects the Koryak mythology has nothing in common with that of the Mongolian-Turk peoples. At this time I must confine myself to a mere statement, without a comparative outline of the Mongolian-Turk and Koryak series of myths.

While incidents characteristic of Eskimo tradition occur with great frequency in Chukchee mythology, and while their raven myths are not numerous, we find in Koryak mythology comparatively few elements that are common to the Eskimo. The most distinctive type of their myths is that of the raven cycle. It may be said, in general, that while the Koryak myths, by their lack of color and by their uniformity, remind one rather of the traditions and tales of the Athapascan tribes, they also contain topics from various groups of myths of the north Pacific coast. We find not only the elements of the raven myths proper of the Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian, but also incidents from the coyote and the mink, from various other culture-hero cycles, and from other animal tales.

All of these incidents have been adapted to Big-Raven and to his family.

Big-Raven combines the characteristics of the American mink in his erotic inclinations, and those of the raven in his greediness and gluttony; and we find in the tales relating to him some of the features common to all the tales current on the north Pacific coast, namely, a love for indecent and coarse tricks which he performs for his own amusement.

Erotic episodes may be found in Mongolian-Turk myths also; but, in spite of their primitive frankness, these episodes are clothed in a poetic form, and are by no means so coarse as the myths of the Pacific coast. The readiness with which the heroes form marital connections with animals and with inanimate objects is characteristic of both sides of the Pacific.

In analyzing the Koryak myths, I have made a list of 122 episodes which occur over and over again. It appears that 101 of these are found in Indian myths of the Pacific coast, 22 in Mongolian-Turk myths, and 34 in those of the Eskimo. I will mention some of the frequently occurring episodes common to the Koryak and the Indian.

1. The tale of the Raven swallowing the sun, and another in which it is told how he released the sun. In the Koryak tale Raven-man swallows the sun, and Big-Raven's daughter releases him. Raven-man keeps the sun in his mouth, and Big-Raven's daughter tickles him until he laughs, opens his mouth, and lets the sun fly out. Then daylight appears again.¹

2. The Raven puts out the fire in order to carry away a girl in the darkness.²

3. A boy, driven out of his parents' house, goes to the desert and becomes a powerful hero.³

4. Numerous tales about people who, by putting on skins of beasts and birds, turn into animals, and vice versa.⁴

¹For similar episodes, see Boas, *Indianische Sagen*, pp. 55 (Selish); 105 (Nutka); 173, 184 (Newetee); 208, 232 (Heiltsuk); 242 (Bilqula); 276 (Tsimshian); 311 (Tlingit). See also A. Krause, *Die Tlinkit Indianer*, p. 261.

²See Boas, *Indianische Sagen*, pp. 43 (Fraser River); 56 (Selish); 260 (Bilqula); 300 (Tsimshian).

³Ibid., pp. 151, 162 (Kwakiutl); 253, 256 (Bilqula); 224 (Heiltsuk).

⁴In various Indian tales.

5. An arrow is sent upward and opens the way into heaven.¹
6. Big-Raven eats all the berries that have been gathered by the women.²
7. Big-Raven mistakes his own reflection in the river for a woman, throws presents to her into the water, until finally he is drowned.³
8. Big-Raven is swallowed by animals, but kills them by pecking at their hearts or by cutting off their stomachs, and then comes out.⁴
9. Big-Raven or some other person, under the pretext that enemies are coming, urges owners of provisions to flee, and then takes away the provisions.⁵
10. A shaman shows his skill; he sings, and the house is filled with water, and seals and other sea-animals swim around.⁶
11. Raven steals fresh water from Crab (*Avvi*).⁷
12. Raven and Small-Bird are rivals in a marriage suit. Raven acts foolishly, and is vanquished by Small-Bird, who is very wise.⁸
13. Big-Raven marries a Salmon-Woman, and his family no longer starve. Angered by Miti, the first wife of Big-Raven, the Salmon-Woman departs for the sea, and Big Raven's family again begin to starve.⁹
14. Big-Raven's son, Emémqut, assumes the shape of a whale, induces the neighbors to harpoon him, and then carries away the magic harpoon-line.¹⁰

¹ Boas, *Indianische Sagen*, pp. 17 (Shuswap); 31 (Fraser River); 64, 65 (Comox); 117 (Nutmka); 167 (Kwakiutl); 173 (Newettee); 215, 234 (Heiltsuk); 246 (Bilqula); 278 (Tsimshian).

² *Ibid.*, pp. 76 (Comox); 107 (Nutmka); 178 (Newettee); 210 (Heiltsuk); 244 (Bilqula).

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 66 (Comox); 114 (Nutmka); 168 (Kwakiutl); 253 (Bilqula).

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 34 (Ponca); 51 (Selish); 75 (Comox); 101 (Nutmka); 119 (Chinook); 171 (Newettee); 212 (Heiltsuk); 256 (Bilqula); 315 (Tlingit).

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 106 (Nutmka); 172 (Newettee); 213, 233 (Heiltsuk); 316 (Tlingit).

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 95 (Eeksen).

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 108 (Nutmka); 174 (Newettee); 209, 232 (Heiltsuk); 276 (Tsimshian); 313 (Tlingit); A. Krause, *Tlinkit Indianer*, p. 261.

⁸ Boas, *op. cit.*, p. 165 (Nutmka).

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 174 (Newettee); 209 (Heiltsuk).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 13, 16 (Shuswap); 23 (Fraser River); 64, 66 (Comox); 201 (Newettee); 248 (Bilqula).

15. Excrement or chamber-vessel speaks and gives warning.¹

16. The Seal winds the tongue of his wife around with twine, and thus deprives her of the power of speech.²

At this time I cannot point out in greater detail the identity of the elements of which the myths of the Koryak and of the Indians of the Pacific coast are composed. This subject will be fully treated in my work on the Koryak, to be published by the American Museum of Natural History.³ But the most cursory review of the facts here presented points to the identity of the products of the imagination of the tribes among which originated the cycle of myths current on both sides of the Pacific — an identity which can by no means be ascribed merely to the similarity of the mental organization of man in general.

While the similarity of the physical type of two tribes may give us the right to conclude that they had a common origin, similarities of culture admit of two possible explanations. The identity of the religious ideas of two tribes may be the result of a common origin; or their ideas may have originated from a common source, and one tribe, though different from the other somatologically, may have borrowed its ideas from the other. However, in the one case as well as in the other, these two tribes must have been at some time in close contact.

The somatological material collected by the expedition has not been studied as yet, and it is therefore impossible to say at present what conclusions may be drawn from it with reference to the origin of the tribes of the two coasts of the Pacific. However, the folklore which has been investigated justifies us in saying that the Koryak of Asia and the North American Indians, though at present separated from each other by an enormous stretch of sea, had at a more or less remote time a continuous and close intercourse and exchange of ideas.

¹ Boas, *op. cit.*, pp. 101 (Chinook); 177 (Newettee).

² *Ibid.*, pp. 176 (Newettee); 244 (Bilqula); 317 (Tlingit).

³ The first part of the memoir on the Koryak, "Religion and Myths," is now in press.