Missing Links. Indigenous Life and Evolutionary Thought in the History of Russian Ethnography**

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Summary: The history of Russian social anthropology has long been best known for the work of three, late nineteenth-century “exile ethnographers,” each sent to the Russian Far East for their anti-tsarist activities as students. All three men—Vladimir Bogoraz, Vladimir Iokhel’son, and Lev Shternberg—produced voluminous and celebrated works on Russian far eastern indigenous life, but it was the young Shternberg who had perhaps the most profound effect on setting the agenda for the canonic evolutionist line soon to take hold in late Russian imperial and early Soviet ethnography. This essay draws on archival, library, and field research to revisit the life and work of Shternberg in order to tell the story of “group marriage” that he documented for the life of one Sakhalin Island indigenous people, Gilyaks (or Nivkhgu, Nivkh). Documented in this way by Shternberg, the Nivkh kinship system proved a crucial “missing link” for Friedrich Engels, who had long been eager to provide evidence of primitive communism as man’s natural state. For Gilyaks, the die was cast. Their role as the quintessential savages of Engels’ favor made them famous in Russian and Soviet ethnographic literature, and significantly enhanced their importance to Soviet government planners. This essay tracks that episode and its aftermaths as a pivotal moment in the history of Russian social anthropology and of evolutionist thought more broadly.

Keywords: Russia, USSR, Siberia, Gilyak, Nivkh, evolutionism, indigenism, kinship, history of ethnography

In 1889, Lev Shternberg, a Russian law student who had been exiled to Sakhalin Island, off the Russian Pacific coast, for his participation in an anti-tsarist organization, met an indigenous man on the street in the small town of Aleksandrovsk. “I saw a disheveled Gilyak shaman,” he entered in his field notes, calling them by a Russian name for a people who otherwise knew themselves as Nivkhgu, meaning simply “people,” and who would later in the twentieth century come to be known

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by Russians as Nivkhi. The shaman had “matted gray hair and a strange cordial smile. Small boys surrounded him, shouting ‘Look at the old shaman, he’ll tell your fortune!’” Shternberg did not know how to respond, but he remembered the shaman’s expression as he walked by. Thus began one of Russia’s most famous ethnographic encounters, marking the beginnings of an entire chapter in the history of evolutionist thought.

From that first meeting, Shternberg went on to produce a corpus of writing on Gilyak life that easily compares to the “five-foot shelf” of writings by the anthropologist Franz Boas, and to the equally more famous epics of Bronislaw Malinowski from the Trobriands. Like his foreign colleagues, Shternberg has enjoyed the reputation as a famous ancestor for the generations of anthropologists he trained and influenced. Yet, looking back on his work today, what perhaps stands out is not even just what he wrote, but how his writings have come to mean such different things to so many.

In this essay, I offer a detailed reading of one of Shternberg’s most prominent works, *The Social Organization of the Gilyak*, in order to demonstrate his formative influence on an entire way of thinking about persons, time, and space—all set along evolutionary frameworks—that would come to dominate ethnological thinking in Russia and the USSR for decades to come. My objectives are twofold: first, to consider the stunning range of accounts themselves, reports casting their native subjects as anything from sorry savages to sophisticated socialists; and second, to ask why only one account, the fledgling evolutionist reading of what it means to be primitive in a civilizing world, rose to the fore. Indeed, although nineteenth-century Gilyaks were as likely to address foreign visitors in Japanese or Chinese as in their own language, they emerged in popular ethnographic accounts as exemplars of both western European evolutionary theory and Russian populist values.

Who was Lev Shternberg? Born in a small town in Ukraine in 1861, he began his career in the radical Russian movement, *Narodnaia Volia* (The People’s Will), advocating violence in the service of the Russian socialist cause. When banished for his activism to Sakhalin Island in 1889, he turned exile to advantage in eight years of ethnographic research. Together with his colleagues Vladimir Bogoraz and Vladimir Iokhele’son, he became a popularizer of the long-standing but little-known Russian tradition of protracted polyglot field studies, one that arguably set the stage for what Boas and Malinowski would later claim as their central fieldwork legacies. Shternberg was a scholar of kinship, religion, and psychology. A passionate and charismatic teacher, he trained the Soviet Union’s first generation of ethnographers. An energetic institution builder, he oversaw the transformation

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1 In the early 1930s, Soviet state planners shifted from “Gilyak,” a term first used for them by indigenous Siberian Evenks, to “Nivkh,” the autonym for the just under 5000 fishermen, hunters, and traders living on the banks of Sakhalin and the Amur River. Although “Nivkh” came into full use by World War II, the use of “Gilyak” in this essay defers to Shternberg’s original usage.

2 Shternberg 1933a, on xiii.

3 The Japanese explorer Mamiya Rinzo (1776–1844) provided detailed portraits of Nivkh life from the Manchu period; the level of sophistication they convey is in stark contrast with the travelogues of Russian explorers of the same period. See Rinsifai 1832. See also Grant 1995, chap. 4, for an account of social relations between Gilyaks and the Japanese at the turn of the twentieth century.
of St. Petersburg’s Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (the Kunstkamera) into one of the world’s leading ethnographic collections. So, at the turn of the century when American anthropologist Franz Boas was looking to build the publications of the Jesup North Pacific Expedition (1897 – 1902), it was not surprising that the St. Petersburg museum recommended Shternberg as one of their most promising candidates.

The Jesup Expedition, organized in early 1897, was named after its leading patron, the American banker Morris Jesup. One of the late great expeditions of American anthropology, and surely one of the most ambitious, it was the first to investigate the origins of Amerindian peoples by drawing on ethnographic data from both the Russian and American North Pacific rim. Though the primary expeditions had already been funded, Boas was looking for someone to write on Sakhalin and the Amur region when Shternberg visited the American Museum of Natural History in New York in 1905. He and Boas struck a deal. Shternberg was to write a book based on his 1890s fieldwork among Gilyaks, a little-known group of just under 5000 people. It was an agreement that outlasted the first target publication date of 1907, and an agreement that outlasted both men. While the English translation Boas sought would not appear in English until 1999, more than seven decades after Shternberg’s death, three different Russian editions of the work appeared in Russia and the Soviet Union in the early decades of the twentieth century.

Shternberg’s Social Organization, then as now, began as a central contribution to north Asian ethnography, but in its theory and argument it came to represent much more than that. When Shternberg was first sent to Sakhalin in 1889, he had gained a cursory education in evolutionism from a fellow prison inmate in Odessa who had read him aloud Friedrich Engels’ book The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State. The book was a detailed commentary on American scholar Lewis Henry Morgan’s work on kinship systems and the rise of civilization; its influence over Shternberg lasted throughout his career. When Shternberg began his studies of Gilyaks in 1891, he wrote excitedly to his friend Moisei Krol’:

I have found a kinship terminology and clan system just like that of the Iroquois and Punalua family of the Sandwich Islands, in a word, remains of the marriage form Morgan based his theory on. […] At first, I was scared to believe it […] but as I went from yurt to yurt and from family to family making my census, I asked everyone how various kin members are called and who has rights to whom. And I became convinced.

From his fieldnotes it is clear that Shternberg was excited by his discovery, one that eventually led him on a theoretical excursion through the rise of restricted

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4 While the most economical source on their early negotiations is Freed et al. 1988, extensive correspondence between the two men from this time is preserved in the archives of the Department of Anthropology at the American Museum of Natural History in York, the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia, and the Academy of the Sciences of the Russian Federation in St. Petersburg.

5 These include the initial triptych of Shternberg 1904a, b, and c, as well as Shternberg 1933a and b. The English edition appeared as Shternberg 1999.

6 Shternberg 1933a, on xii.
cross-cousin marriage. Scholars from Morgan to Rivers to Engels and Freud had postulated an evolutionary paradigm of human social organization, beginning with incest, leading to a generalized “cross-cousin marriage” or “sister-exchange,” and later to more complex systems such as matrilateral cross-cousin marriage. With Henry Morgan’s theories of group marriage coming under attack, first from the Scottish juror John F. McLennan, and later more subtly from Boas himself, Shternberg saw the Social Organization manuscript as a detailed defense of Morgan’s arguments. As Shternberg wrote, “What Morgan based on speculation, we find fully realized among the Gilyak.” He offered an emblematic illustration of the role of mother’s brother in the generalized exchange of women, and in the development of prescriptive alliance theory.

What actually did Shternberg discover? To be sure, in Shternberg’s time, Gilyaks used formal terms of address that were complex enough to confuse even themselves, and that required a lifetime for mastery. But did this constitute, in the very confident way we find in Social Organization, such a juridical edifice? As David Schneider once wrote, whether we are reading Edward E. Evans-Pritchard or Claude Lévi-Strauss, Meyer Fortes or Edmund Leach, the tremendous constructedness of the kinship idiom rarely comes into play:

Fortes says quite clearly that for the Tallensi, the ideology of kinship is so dominant that all other modes of relationship are assimilated to that ideology. Leach affirms that kinship is not a thing in itself but rather a way of thinking about the rights and usages with respect to land for the villages of Pul Eliya. They were there. They saw it. They talked to the natives. But just what did Fortes and Leach and Evans-Pritchard actually see and hear? Schneider’s work, along with other critiques of kinship that followed Oxford scholar Rodney Needham’s cardinal 1971 collected volume, has not diminished kinship’s role within anthropological thought so much as return us to the roots of kinship studies as a metaphor for anthropology itself. Reading Shternberg today, a hundred years after his fieldwork, we have cause to reflect on his answers to some of Schneider’s questions, for whether the anthropological reader has ever heard of Gilyaks or not, Gilyak kinship will be both strange and familiar. On the one hand, Shternberg concedes that “for the European,” the language of Gilyak kinship “naturally produces a sense of total confusion.” But it is also a language that became emblematic of anthropology’s efforts across the twentieth century to systematize our knowledge of other worlds. In the post-Soviet age, we can also reflect on Shternberg’s work along with Gilyak readers and ask how they look back

7 Archive of the Academy of Sciences of the Russian Federation, Petersburg Branch [hereafter AAN], f. 282, o. 1, d. 120/1-14.
8 “A Note on Mr. J. F. McLennan’s ‘Primitive Marriage’,” found in Morgan 1871, chap. 27, is among the best summaries of these early debates.
9 Shternberg 1999, on 98.
10 Schneider 1984, on 3.
11 Needham 1971. Some recent critiques of the anthropological study of kinship include Collier and Yanagisako 1987; Faubion 1996; Goody 1990.
12 Shternberg 1933a, on 108.
on their own century of being represented both inside and outside anthropology’s purview.

The Route to Sakhalin

Lev (Khaim) Iakovlevich Shternberg was born on May 4, 1861, in the Ukrainian town of Zhitomir. His childhood friend Moisei Krol’ remembers their Jewish neighborhood as crowded, with rundown, one-story wooden homes, and his young companion Lev as energetic but intensely shy with strangers.13 Their early life, as recounted by Krol’, was filled with books, camaraderie, and a powerful mix of Judaica and mysticism. Zhitomir itself was isolated for that time, located some thirty miles from the nearest railroad and without a dominant industry. By the time of Krol’ and Shternberg’s adolescence, however, Krol’ paints a quiet, provincial life grown increasingly turbulent with the disappearances and arrests of older friends who had left Zhitomir to take part in revolutionary activities.

In the 1870s and early 1880s, much of Russian politics oscillated between the autocratic, often repressive rule of the immense state bureaucracy and expectations for political reform brought on by the emancipation of the serfs in 1861. The events of 1861 captured the imagination of many of Russia’s urban intellectual classes, beginning a tradition of populist intervention in the lives of the empire’s underclasses that would eventually greatly influence Shternberg. Before and after the emancipation, the Russian writers Aleksandr Herzen and Nikolai Chernyshevskii sent thousands from across the urban intelligentsias into the Russian countryside to appreciate and, more importantly, to educate Russia’s “soulful” peasantry. The belief was that these encounters between city and country (khozhdeniia v narod) would strengthen and advance Russia’s famous tradition of communal organization, the peasant mir.14 By the 1870s, this was taking place in unprecedented numbers, with over 200 groups from European Russia’s fifty-one administrative regions (guberniia) taking part in this rural invasion in 1874 alone. However, the urban activists were divided over both goal and method, and by the end of the 1870s, two distinct factions had formed. One favored working through small-scale, incremental gestures advanced by propagandists living in local villages, while another militated for higher profile political acts against the state in the cities.15 Shternberg and Krol’ inherited both of these traditions when they joined Narodnaia Volia upon entering Saint Petersburg Imperial University in 1881, months after the group had tried on the life of Tsar Aleksandr II.

Historians have looked back upon Narodnaia Volia through many lenses. Early Bolshevik revolutionaries embraced their use of violence in the defense of the

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13 Krol’ 1929.
14 Troitskii 1996, on 69.
15 Ibid. Both sides in the 1870s successor movement to Herzen, Zemlia i Volia (Land and Will), had their detractors: Local village policemen had little trouble identifying and arresting the outside agitators because “they were the only village residents who would neither drink nor take bribes,” while their urban counterparts had different trouble maintaining secrecy because of the more sensational resistance acts they advocated. Troitskii explains that when the two groups broke off in 1879, forming Chernyi Peredel (Black Partition) and Narodnaia Volia (The People’s Will), the first took zemlia while the second took volia.
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working class, whereas imperial Russian liberals saw them as noble but quixotic
men of dangerous means. Notably, however, as Christoph Gassenschmidt has
argued, the group also served as a channel for Jewish political activism: up to
twenty-five percent of Narodnaia Volia membership in some regions was of
Jewish origin, and five out of the seven leaders of the movement were prominent
Jewish figures. Although the government tracked the group’s membership at
500, mostly in Ukraine and along the Volga, its real numbers were likely ten to
twenty times that, with police records counting over 8000 arrests of the group’s
members between 1881 and 1883 alone.

With a young Vladimir (Natan) Bogoraz, Shternberg and Krol’ became mem-
bers of Narodnaia Volia’s “Central Student Circle” in 1881. Yet, in 1882, the
movement was already in decline as a result of sustained government siege. By the
end of their first year in St. Petersburg, police sent Shternberg and Krol’ back to
Ukraine for having participated in demonstrations. Shternberg enrolled in law at
Novorossiske Imperial University in Odessa and, a year later, continuing to rise
within the movement’s ranks, became editor of its journal, Vestnik narodnoi voli.

For Shternberg the risks in such work were evident. Between 1879 and 1883,
amidst thousands of arrests, the government held over seventy trials to indict Nar-
odnaia Volia members, sending some 2000 people to prison. Authorities arrested
Shternberg himself in April of 1886 after police exposed an elderly female street
vendor whom he had recruited for the distribution of literature. Shternberg
spent three years in the Odessa Central Prison before the court sentenced him to
ten years of exile on Sakhalin Island.

Shternberg’s prison diaries from the years 1887 and 1888, fourteen notebooks
now preserved in the Archive of the Russian Academy of Sciences in St. Petersburg,
are documents that astonish for the range of acquired languages and literatures oc-
cupying Shternberg while in confinement. Long passages in Russian, Yiddish,
English, and French, interspersed with Italian vocabulary lists, fill the pages
stamped by prison censors. Many of Shternberg’s entries are excerpts from Shake-
spere, Milton, Mill, Machiavelli, and, perhaps all too aptly for his imminent sen-
tencing, Robinson Crusoe. By the tone of the entries, the prison years were a pain-
ful, introspective period that recalled his childhood in Zhitomir as formative for
his later intellectual life. Shternberg wrote,

16 Ibid., on 67. One of the most detailed accounts of the participation of Shternberg, Krol’ and Bogo-
raz in Narodnaia Volia is found in Haberer 1995, chap. 11. See also Malinin 1972; Tvardovskaia
1983; Gassenschmidt 1995; Brower 1975; Gleason 1980; Venturi 1960. For a particularly produc-
tive look at the question of genre in Vera Figner’s Narodnaia Volia memoirs, see Hoogenboom
1996.
17 Gassenschmidt 1995, on 5.
18 Trotski 1996, on 70.
19 Tal’skii 1961, on 108. For an example of Shternberg’s most provocative political writing at this
time see Sapir 1974.
20 Krol’ 1929, on 229.
21 AAN, f. 282, o. 1, d. 120/1-14.
22 Although Shternberg excerpted the first and best known of Daniel Defoe’s Crusoe voyages, from
Defoe 1789, Defoe sent Crusoe through the Tatar Strait and up the Amur River en route to China
in his second volume Defoe 1925.
My education was an imperfect one, though my family gave me more than I could ever absorb. From the ages of five to twelve, I studied the Hebrew language and religion. These years were decisive. I was deprived of all joys of youth, and the lasting impressions of these years are moral ones. Conversations on morality and learning were among the only I had. Sad and hollow. […] Instead of novels, I studied philosophy and history, creating a chasm between myself and my school friends. I condemned them, and in turn was mocked by them. Even those that liked me took issue with my company, for I was strange to all. […] That position imbued me with an inexpressible bitterness.23

More important than reading Robinson Crusoe, however, was Shternberg’s first encounter with Friedrich Engels’ book, The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State. Much folklore surrounds what became, at least for later Soviet biographers, a decisive event in Shternberg’s life. While Shternberg’s student Erukhim Kreinovich wrote that Shternberg learned German in prison in order to read Engels in the original, more consistent accounts suggest that Shternberg had someone read the German edition aloud to him in Russian translation.24 Our only hint from Shternberg’s archive comes after Shternberg arrived on Sakhalin, when he wrote of “relaxing in the evenings with the Ursprung.”25 “That the Ursprung in question was Engels’ Ursprung der Familie, des Privateigenthums und des Staats has held sway as the reigning assumption; Shternberg’s formal ethnographic work, soon to begin, made it clear that he had Engels and Morgan on his mind.

The Destination

The Sakhalin of Shternberg’s day bore the marks of a somewhat recent territorial acquisition by Russia. Both Russia and Japan had been making claims to the island since the 1850s, when Russian governmental presence on Sakhalin became a reality. The Treaty of St. Petersburg in 1875 formally put Sakhalin into Russian hands. Its turbulent waters and rocky shores made the island’s economy suffer by contrast with the booming Primor’e region on the mainland. Instead, with so many folkloric visions of Siberia predicated on distance, Sakhalin took on the reputation as one of the most distant outposts of all. At some 6500 km and eight time zones from the Russian capital, Sakhalin remained farther from Petersburg than Newfoundland. Despite its most northerly tip being on the same latitude as Hamburg or Dublin, Muscovites from a hundred years ago through to the close of the Soviet period could receive northern hardship pay for taking jobs there. Despite being only fifty kilometers north of Japan, it is thought of more often not as the Far East but “the Uttermost East” or more commonly, “the end of the world.”26 After his restless journey to the island in 1890, Anton Chekhov began a tradition of prosaic exaggeration about the island’s isolation at “the end of the world,” despite the fact that the booming city of Vladivostok lay only a few hun-

23 AAN, f. 282 o. I, d. 120/12, I. 1-3ob. Although Shternberg wrote this entry, as some others, in his own English, possibly to seek privacy from prison censors, I have modified the original text to avoid grammatical confusion.


25 AAN, f. 282 o. 1, d. 190, I. 59.

26 Hawes 1904, on 269.
Following Chekhov, it was a matter of course that when the Polish geographer Ferdinand Ossendowski visited Sakhalin in 1905 he dubbed it “the banished island” and, in turn, “the inaccessible shore.”

Given these impediments to more rapid colonization, the island’s indigenous Gilyaks initially fared somewhat better than, for example, their counterparts in northwestern Siberia such as the Nenets or the Ostiak (Khanty), whom Russians had been actively colonizing since the fifteenth century. However, these literal and metaphoric distances turned against the local island populations in the latter half of the century when the tsarist administration saw in Sakhalin the perfect outpost for its growing exiled population. Officials began considering the penal colony idea in 1870, and by 1881 had established the island prison system. The tsar accorded Sakhalin its own governor, and from 1884 onward over one thousand exiles were shipped to Sakhalin each year. By 1888 Sakhalin had become, in the words of George Kennan, “the largest and most important penal establishment in Siberia.” Indeed, although exiles were banished all across Siberia during the tsarist and Soviet periods, often to places even farther than Sakhalin, such as Chukotka or Kamchatka, the island’s choppy seas and perceived isolation made it one of the most dreaded of exile destinations. Any man with a sentence of more than two years and eight months could be sent to Sakhalin as could any woman under the age of forty with a sentence of two years or more. Exiled political agitators of any stripe were sent automatically. The writer James McConkey notes that by the end of the nineteenth century Sakhalin had, through the eyes of its Russian prisoners, become synonymous with hopelessness, bestial callousness, moral depravity, obliteration of the self, despair, and miasma.

In March of 1889, Shternberg sailed from Odessa to Sakhalin on the ship Peterburg. Although Shternberg later posted a comforting letter to his parents about the voyage, Ossendowski’s account of the passage he made on the same boat sixteen years later offers us a stark description.

Russian ships used to sail from Odessa to the western shore of Sakhalin two or three times a year, ships that wore a strange appearance. No passengers were visible on the decks, only a dark flag with some letters on it flew at the masthead. If anyone could have boarded this mysterious ship near Colombo or Shanghai, he would have been struck by the sound of clanking chains and by the continuous buzz below decks that would have reminded him of some enormous beehive—only these bees were not free insects [...]. This sea journey of these chained men and women shut up in iron cages recalled the most terrible scenes of Dante’s Inferno. Storms at sea, heat under the tropics, cold in the North Pacific, dirt surpassing anything the most vivid imagination could picture, persecution of these helpless victims—all this took a toll on their ranks by the hundreds, a result considered desirable from the government standpoint, as its diminished costs and saved trouble.

27 Chekhov 1978, on 45. For one of the best discussions of Chekhov’s writings from this voyage, see Popkin 1992.
28 Ossendowski 1924, on 223.
29 Quoted after Stephan 1971, on 68.
30 Hawes 1904, on 3–37.
31 McConkey 1986, on 154. For another of many examples, see Panov 1905, on 1.
32 Ossendowski 1924, on 223–224.
Upon his arrival in 1889, Shternberg’s status was that of a political rather than criminal exile, which permitted him to reside in special housing in the small administrative town of Aleksandrovsk, though he joined other prisoners at hard labor during the days. However, by March of 1890, penal officials cited Shternberg’s harmful ideological influence over other local exiles and relocated him to the remote community of Viakhtu some one hundred kilometers north of Aleksandrovsk on the Tatar Strait. Playwright Anton Chekhov was known to be en route to Sakhalin at the time, and authorities were fearful of having Shternberg brief Chekhov on the finer points of the tsarist penal system, an additional factor often later noted in Soviet writings.

Viakhtu consisted of five houses for exiles who had finished their prison terms, and was a waystation for Gilyaks traveling between the northwest coast and Aleksandrovsk. In his field diaries Shternberg described a small house where he lived under surveillance by imperial police officers as

A lonely abandoned grave in the empty taiga along the banks of the Tatar Strait [...]. The gloomy sky hung low over the snowy savannah, bordered by a thick fog, and beyond that it seemed was the end of the world, the kingdom of endless ice and gloom [...] in the house we were five, myself, three former contacts turned officers and a military supervisor. Vigilantly they kept watch through a tiny window looking out onto the shore, thinking they might find a passerby or runaway convict [...] the hope for them as for everyone wants to win the curious three-ruble prize for each fugitive captured.

“It was here,” Shternberg wrote, “that I was ethnographically baptized.” In his Russian Palestine, “a grim land!” where the sea was “eternally stormy,” and where the true inhabitants were “bears, powerful winds, punishing hellish blizzards and destructive hurricanes,” Shternberg began his investigations of local Gilyak life. Shternberg’s Narodnaia Volia comrade-in-exile, Bogoraz, himself sent to the Kolyma Peninsula, later coyly described Shternberg’s decision to study Gilyak as “owing to the leisure time we all enjoyed then,” underscoring the unlikely boost that banishment gave anthropology in Siberia as well as the Trobriand Islands. However, it was more likely the practical interests of the Sakhalin administration, who saw in Shternberg’s restlessness someone both to organize a census of the island’s Gilyak population and appoint a network of native officials who would report to Aleksandrovsk authorities. In February of 1891, the prison administration allowed Shternberg to undertake what would be the first of dozens of excursions to Gilyak communities across North Sakhalin.  

33 The town is now called Viakhta.
34 Gagen-Torn 1975, on 28–30.
35 Taksami, on 109–110.
36 Shternberg 1999, preface.
37 Bogoraz correspondence quoted after the Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Rossiskoi Federatsii (State Archive of the Russian Federation, Moscow, hereafter GARF), f. 3977, o. 1, d. 279, l. 110. For a particularly good reading of Bogoraz’s early fieldwork in Chukotka, see Krupnik 1996.
38 Shternberg 1933a, on 112; “Dnevnik puteshestviia L. Ia. Shternberga” (1891), AAN, f. 282, o. 1, d. 190, l. 48.
39 Shternberg, 1933a, on 22–23.
a new kind of rural invasion for Shternberg, but one for which he was ironically well suited, given the very *Narodnaia Volya* background for which he had been imprisoned.

**Nivkhgu**

For the Gilyaks of Russian observation, or simply “people,” as Nivkhgu called themselves in their own language, Shternberg arrived at a time when outside influences were widely restructuring their access to natural resources. Hunters and fishermen by tradition, the Gilyak population had never exceeded 5000, divided roughly half and half between the Amur delta and North Sakhalin. Nevertheless, because of the river and coastal locations of their villages they had long been integrated into expansive trade networks with neighboring indigenous groups and the Amur mainland Manchurians. By the 1860s, they were clearly under new pressure to define their rights to resource use as Russian and Japanese fishing fleets began sparring over the prime waters. The arrival of fishing industrialists also introduced the additional draw of paid seasonal labor: Many Gilyaks were lured into taking disadvantageous salary advances and fell into considerable debt.40

Although by the late nineteenth century some Gilyaks had begun to build Russian-style houses, the majority still lived a semi-nomadic life between summer and winter homes in order to best exploit seasonal fishing and hunting grounds. The traditional Gilyak summer dwelling was a large one-room wooden cabin perched on posts four to five feet above the ground, whereas winter dwellings were partly underground to ensure warmth. On Sakhalin, both shores of the northern portion of the island as well as the banks of the central Tym’ and Poronai rivers were lined with Gilyak villages approximately every five kilometers. Anywhere from one or two to ten families constituted a village, with the maximum number of residents usually around fifty. Almost every family kept a dog team for winter transport and shared narrow wooden log boats for navigating the hazardous coastal waters.

Fishing dominated the Gilyak economy in almost all respects. Summer was the busiest period, given the magnitude of the fish runs and the volume of salmon to be dried into *iukola*, which would be the main food supply for the rest of the year. Winter, by contrast, they set aside for periodic hunting and almost constant socializing, as Shternberg wrote, “*dolce far niente,*” sweet doing nothing.41 The Gilyak diet consisted of fresh or dried salmon, a variety of wild berries prepared plainly or in custards, and a range of products adopted from Japanese and Manchu traders, such as low-grade brick tea, millet, potatoes, sugar, alcohol, and tobacco. Traditional Gilyak clothing, in the form of tunics and pants for men and long tunic-style dresses for women, was made from a variety of textiles, including complexly crafted salmon-skin jackets. As with the clothing of other indigenous peoples of the Amur area, Gilyak designs borrowed heavily from local Chinese practices. Few if any Gilyaks were known to be literate, though many had practical knowledge of Chinese, Japanese, Russian, and other languages for trading pur-

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40 Smoliak 1975, on 161 – 182; Smoliak 1960, on 96 – 98.
41 Shternberg 1933a, on 27.
poses. Although Shternberg expressed surprise at the number of Gilyaks who knew Russian, he worked largely in Gilyak, a language noted for its grammatical complexity. For example, it includes twenty-six ways of counting from one to ten based on the spiritual and material qualities of the objects being counted. Linguists consider it to be so distinct as to have no known affiliation with another language.

Despite the fact that Gilyaks, as both Shternberg and later anthropologists observed, came the closest of any of the far eastern peoples in the nineteenth century to adopting Russian ways, late nineteenth-century Russian Orthodox missionaries recorded few efforts to win Gilyak converts. Through to the early twentieth century, reports suggest a Gilyak worldview that remains animistic, recognizing four spirit masters presiding in turn over the Sky, the Hills, the Water, and Fire. Gilyaks recognized each of these figures through feeding rituals, such as a ritual feeding of the sea with tobacco and mos' (an aspic made from seal fat, fish skin, and berries) before commencing a sea expedition. By the same token, Gilyaks had a complex symbolic relationship with the animal world: Bears in particular were regarded as ritual kin, often kept in pens inside or alongside family homes for several years as visiting guests, culminating in a bear festival that marked the high point of the winter social season.

By virtue of language, clothing, systems of counting, and sheer physical appearance, there was much to set Gilyaks apart from the gradually expanding Russian community around them. Between sacrifice, shamanic healing rituals, and Gilyak forest feedings, there was much fodder for the nascent practice of ethnography, which my description only begins to touch on here. However, what makes the literature on Gilyak life so striking—Shternberg’s Social Organization being no exception—is the shifting tides of what counted as useful or important knowledge from one political era to another. This was perhaps most evident in the Soviet period, when Shternberg’s posthumous editors published his careful work on the clan system “to ensure the liquidation of patriarchal clans.”

Group Marriage

By the time Shternberg arrived on Sakhalin in 1889, the American scholar Lewis Henry Morgan had set in motion a series of debates on the nature of classificatory kinship in his pathbreaking books League of the Iroquois (1851), Systems of Consanguinity and Affinity (1871), and Ancient Society (1877). It was the last of these books, Ancient Society, that the Russian jurist Maksim Kovalevskii lent to Karl Marx, who made extensive notes on the book between before his death in 1883. One year later, Engels published his and Marx’s response to Morgan in the influential Ursprung der Familie, des Privateigenthums und des Staats (1884). While Shternberg states frequently in Social Organization that his goal was to test Mor-
gan’s hypotheses, it is nonetheless in the context of both Engels and late nineteenth-century theories of group marriage that many of Shternberg’s observations on Gilyak life can be understood.

Morgan’s first book, *League of the Iroquois*, grew out of his early commitment to the rights of local Iroquois populations in his native New York state. In this 1858 publication, he paid early attention to what he found to be a uniquely integrative kinship terminology that Iroquois used to reach across clan affiliations. Morgan described Iroquois kin terms as “classificatory,” because entire groups of relatives both lineal and collateral, could be classified as “group brothers” or “group sisters,” depending on the angle of relationship. Shortly after the book’s publication, however, Morgan found similar patterns among the Ojibwa of Lake Superior and excitedly began sending out questionnaires in preparation for a wide-scale comparison of kinship terminologies.44

In 1871, Morgan’s ambitious *Systems of Consanguinity and Affinity* analyzed kinship systems set forth by the 139 respondents who had answered his call for data. The seeds of what soon came to be termed “group marriage” emerged in Morgan’s reflections upon “pinaluan” (or *punaluan*) sexual customs offered to him by Lorin Andrews, a judge of the *Supreme Court* of Hawaii. Andrews had written, “The relationship of *punalua* is rather ambiguous. It arose from the fact that two or more brothers, with their wives or two or more sisters with their husbands, were inclined to possess each other in common; but the modern use of the word is that of *dear friend*, an intimate companion.”45 Andrews offered Morgan a conjectural solution to the “mystery of Hawaiian kinship” that Shternberg would later see by analogy among Gilyaks—how it was that all males and females of a man’s parents’ generation could be fathers and mothers, how so many members of his own generation could be brothers and sisters and so on. Morgan’s conclusion that these terms were survivals of an earlier age of promiscuity was a milestone in thinking on evolution. Here was a stage of marital development:

> Older in point of time than polygamy and polyandria, and yet involving the essential features of both. The several brothers, who thus cohabited with each other’s wives, lived in polygyny; and the several sisters who thus cohabited with each other’s husbands, lived in polyandria. It also presupposes *communal families*, with communism in living, which, there are abundant reasons for supposing, were very general in the primitive ages of mankind; and one of the stages through which human society passed before reaching the family in its proper sense, founded upon marriage between single pairs.46

In print, Morgan was cautious with his evolutionism. His stages in the development of the family were landmarks of experience known to varying degrees among different peoples of the world.47 Yet many readers saw simpler unilinear development upon finding his cardinal list of fifteen stages of family life in *Sys-

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44 Hiatt 1996, on 36–38.
45 Morgan 1871, on 453, fn, emphasis added. For Morgan’s fuller account of the Hawaiian case, see Morgan 1871, on 451–458; Morgan 1877, on 427–428. For a concise discussion of the Punaluan category as an example of Morgan’s non-symbolic logic, see Sahlins 1976, on 58–59.
46 Morgan 1871, on 457, emphasis added.
47 Ibid., on 479.
tems, beginning with “promiscuous intercourse” and continuing through “the intermarriage of cohabitation of brothers and sisters,” to “the civilized family” and, finally, “the overthrow of the classificatory system of relationship, and the substitution of the descriptive.”48 In doing so, Morgan joined conjecture put forth by Johann J. Bachofen, Henry S. Maine, John Lubbock, and John F. McLennan that the earliest forms of human society were found in a promiscuous horde.49

In his next book, Ancient Society, group marriage emerged more clearly as an explanation for kin terms that tied certain societies to these developmental stages. After meeting with Darwin, Morgan had begun to think of family structures as evidence for different stages in human social evolution.50 He assigned group marriage to the period of savagery; a loose pairing arrangement between husband and wife to the period of barbarism; and the monogamy hegemonic today to mankind’s later rise of civilization.51

In his 1884 response to Morgan, Engels streamlined Morgan’s analyses into a more trenchant indictment of the rise of bourgeois patriarchy. While Morgan concentrated primarily on the first two stages of savagery and barbarism, Engels focused on the civilizing process and how family relations intersected with the rise of private property concepts. Whereas in savagery and barbarism descent was often matrilineal, Engels argued that civilization, by contrast, promoted patrilineal descent through monogamy. When descent was traced through the female line, Engels reasoned, paternity, or more specifically, precise rules of material inheritance, could not be firmly held. “Once it had passed into the private possession of families and there rapidly begun to augment, this wealth dealt a severe blow to the society founded on pairing marriage and the matriarchal gens,” Engels wrote. “Monogamous marriage comes on the scene as the subjugation of the one sex by the other.”52 While modern states presented themselves as products of natural social evolution—“the image and reality of reason,” as Georg F. W. Hegel said—, Engels countered that states were products of society that bound up specific interests in the accumulation of private wealth by a few, and that families governed under a patriarchal system of monogamy served that end.53 Nonetheless, in order to demonstrate that the bourgeois state was a temporary formation, Marx and Engels needed other formations since gone by. For this they prized Morgan’s catalog of primitive life.

Many scholars have observed that although there was little to explain how patrilineal descent accounts for property more accurately than matrilineal descent, the details counted less than the framework. “What mattered to Marx and Engels,” Maurice Bloch wrote, “was not so much the specific history which had produced these concepts, but the fact that they had a history at all, that the con-

48 Ibid., on 480.
49 Kradar 1974, on 63.
50 Darwin’s role in the work of Morgan and later Engels was nonetheless a passive one. Reeling from the social arguments being drawn from his work, Darwin reacted in horror when Marx proposed dedicating Das Kapital to him. See Bloch 1983, on 5; Vucinich 1988.
51 Morgan, 1871, chaps. 2 and 3.
52 Engels 1972, on 119, 128.
53 Ibid., 144, including the Hegel quote.
cepts depended on the type of society and economy in which they occurred.”⁵⁴ Indeed, the most salient part of Engels’ book might have been the title, where the rise of family, private property, and the state could all be tied to one origin, monogamy.

Missing Links

Where did Gilyaks fit into all of this? Like many indigenous peoples across Siberia in the late nineteenth century, clan affiliation structured a great deal of Gilyak political, economic, social, and religious life. There were roughly two dozen active clans among Sakhalin Gilyaks during Shternberg’s eight years there. While only one clan or lineage ideally prevailed in a given village, in practice mixed settlements had made the system more complex by the late 1800s. Shternberg’s descriptions of the Gilyak kinship system were famously labyrinthine: Gilyaks were exogamous in that they married only outside their lineage in a complex system of reciprocities that bound together, in Gilyak terms, the wife-givers and the wife-takers.⁵⁵ But what made Gilyaks unique, Shternberg claimed, was a triangulated system of marital exchange, based on a tri-clan “phratry,” a term drawing on the Greek for “brotherhood” but here used to signal a kinship group organized by descent (from the Gilyak pandf) that underwrote a complex web of mutual social and economic obligations.⁵⁶ Following Morgan’s terminology, Shternberg charted Gilyak kin relations under the heading of “group marriage,” because he found the Gilyak kin system to be remarkably similar to the punaluan system in Hawaii that Morgan had documented. According to the classificatory nature of Gilyak kin terminology, any married man or woman had several potential “husbands” or “wives” from his or her marrying generation. As a result, “all men of a given lineage had rights of sexual access to women of their own generation in the wife-giving lineage,” and by the same token, women had the same access to men of their own generation in the wife-taking lineage.⁵⁷ In practice, the system was a loose kind of monogamy: Many Gilyak men and women initiated discreet but permissible affairs, particularly with visiting guests, and under more formal circumstances of levirate, widowed women often married their husband’s younger brother. Nonetheless, public displays of affection were uncommon and most Gilyaks considered it indiscreet to discuss extramarital activities in public.⁵⁸ The crucial element here is the reference to group marriage, for, according to Morgan’s

⁵⁴ Bloch 1983, on 94.
⁵⁵ Shternberg’s cardinal writings on Gilyak kinship can be found in Shternberg 1933a, on 30–45, 81–246; Shternberg 1933b, pasim. Smoliak 1975, on 76–88, 150–167 and 222, is an excellent Russian review. The clearest analyses in English are in Shternberg 1999; Black 1973, chap. 4; Black 1972; Lévi-Strauss 1969, chap. 14. For an example of the variety of ways people put a similar social form into practice, see Barnes 1974, chaps. 14–17.
⁵⁶ In his 1904 a, b, and c, Shternberg stressed the tri-clan model, although in Shternberg 1999, he stresses that minimally four clans, and ideally five, were required for the successful local functioning of any given marrying network.
⁵⁷ Lydia Black 1973, on 34. Black’s reference to “lineages” resonates with Lévi-Strauss’ observation that Shternberg’s preference for “clan” might have been better captured by the more specific idea of lineage. See Lévi-Strauss 1969, on 301.
⁵⁸ Shternberg 1933a, on 169. Kreinovich 1936 makes similar observations.
taxonomy, any group still practicing group marriage could only fall under the category of savagery.

When Engels came upon Shternberg’s first field report from Sakhalin in the Moscow newspaper *Russkie Vedomosti* in 1892, he seized upon the case as an example of group marriage still extant and had it translated into German for reprinting within days. Shternberg’s account was important for Engels not only because it suggested the existence of group marriage in general but because the perceived backwardness of Gilyak life resonated so well with his and Marx’s evolutionary framework. What made the Gilyak case relevant was that, in Engels’ view, “It demonstrates the similarity, even the identity in their main characteristics, of the social institutions of primitive peoples at approximately the same stage of development.” What was good for Morgan, by association, was good for Marx and Engels’ evolutionist theory of class struggle. Hence, that Gilyaks were proven to be a primitive people with backward customs became, in its own way, a building block in the edifice of Russian socialism. In the late Soviet period, as the best-known poster children for primitives seeking civilization, Gilyaks were also a tableau by which the success of the new Soviet cultural project would be measured.

**European Adaptations**

While Engels popularized Shternberg’s work for Russian and, perhaps more importantly, later Soviet readers, Shternberg swayed little from the basic Morganian position developed in *Systems of Consanguinity and Affinity*. After the Sandwich Islands, the main evidence for Morgan’s theory of group marriage came from anthropology’s El Dorado of complex kinship systems, Australia. In 1880, Australian researchers Lorimer Fison and Alfred W. Howitt released their monograph, *Kamilaroi and Kurnai*, announcing “the most extensive system of communal marriage the world has ever known.” Despite the book’s dedication to and approving preface from Morgan, the material on group marriage more closely resembled simply polygyny than proponents of Morgan’s theory might have liked. Nine years later, Baldwin Spencer and Frank Gillen published a detailed account of group marriage practice among the Dieri in their book, *The Native Tribe of Central Australia* (1899). William H. R. Rivers’ 1907 essay on the Toda marked a further and final landmark. In *Social Organization*, Shternberg approvingly relied on each of these.

Meanwhile, however, criticisms of Morgan’s framework had been mounting in wider anthropological circles. Although his own book, *Primitive Marriage* (1865),

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60 Engels 1972, on 239.
61 Morgan quoted after Fison and Howitt 1880, on 10.
62 Rivers 1907. While in 1906, on 518–519 and 531, Rivers argued that the coexistence of polyandry and polygyny would be a more accurate expression of sexual ties than “group marriage,” he continued to refer to group marriage in his work. For a further discussion of Fison and Howitt, Spencer, Gillen, and Rivers, see Hiatt 1996, on 43–49. See also Barnes’ excellent remarks on group marriage in his introduction to Kohler 1970.
met mixed reviews, the Scottish juror McLennan leveled some of the strongest attacks on Morgan’s work in an 1876 response to Systems. Beginning at the premise that group marriage was only a postulate to explain a puzzle of kinship terms, McLennan asked why such terms could not be mere salutations with ambiguous meanings. Later, Northcote Thomas furthered this in a 1906 essay by giving the example of the French word femme, meaning both woman and wife. Why would someone call an entire class of women “mother,” Thomas asked, when it was clearly apparent who one’s birth mother actually was? Thomas’ alternative was to take the prime examples of group marriage data, such as the fraternal polyandry Fison and Howitt found among Kamilaroi and Kurnai, and explain them as contemporary institutions rather than survivals.  

By 1913, Bronislaw Malinowski and Alfred Radcliffe-Brown amended Thomas’ intervention within the framework of functionalism by reasoning that much of the problem lay with the idea of “marriage” itself, a much broader category of functions and relations than had been considered in earlier debates. Morgan tended to interpret marriage strictly as a right of sexual access, rather than a larger edifice of securities and obligations such as the legalities of reproduction, child raising, and economic support. So, too, with levirate, Morgan tended to see the right of a brother to his brother’s wife or widow as a choice rather than an obligation that created a social security for clan solidarity. In the context of Morgan and Malinowski, Shternberg fell somewhere in the middle. He vigorously defended Morgan, but recognized (in a handful of lines from Chapter 10 of Social Organization) that “To participate in group marriage is the duty of all cousins.”  

New functionalist critiques notwithstanding, the subtlest figure working against Shternberg’s argument for Gilyak group marriage was perhaps Boas himself, who chiseled away at the Morganian evolutionary stages in his 1911 book, The Mind of Primitive Man. While conceding the similarities found across early human societies, Boas pointedly wrote,

The theory of parallel development [advanced by Morgan], if it is to have any significance, would require that among all branches of mankind the steps of invention should have followed, at least approximately, in the same order, and that no important gaps should be found. The facts, so far as known at the present time, are entirely contrary to this view.

Unexpected similarities in material and social systems, Boas argued, had obscured the differences, which followed from a multitude of causes and consequences.

In the years after Shternberg’s death in 1927, further critiques diminished much of the group marriage debate, at least in the way Morgan had framed it. In his 1941 Structure and Function in Primitive Society, Radcliffe-Brown described

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63 Hiatt 1996, on 40–41, 46–47.
64 The functionalist approach is deeply implied in Engels’ reworkings of Morgan, when Engels used the institution of marriage to fashion an early sophisticated critique of gender roles and obligations. For more on Engels’ contribution to Marxist feminism, see Leacock 1972.
65 Boas 1927, on 182. See also Reichard 1938.
group marriage’s place in evolutionary kinship theory as “one of the most fantastic in a subject that is full of fantastic hypotheses.” While Radcliffe-Brown’s own research in Australia conceded that classificatory kinship terms demanded certain levels of behavior appropriate to the imputed relation, fictive or real, he argued that there were clear distinctions, in every Australian society considered by Morgan, that asserted the primacy of the nuclear family. George P. Murdock, in his canonic 1949 guide to kinship studies, Social Structure, followed Boas in arguing that there was no direct relationship between kinship nomenclature and societal complexity. Lévi-Strauss, who published his essay on Gilyaks in Elementary Structures of Kinship the same year, remarked only that Shternberg was ultimately more observer than theoretician, subject to “rash historical interpretations.”

Whatever their fate in kinship debates abroad, for Gilyaks the die was cast. Their role as the quintessential savages of Engels’ favor made them famous in Russian and Soviet ethnographic literature. Their personification of primitive communism, postulated by Morgan and elaborated by Engels, became axiomatic. What was lost in the process was that the report that found its way into Russkie Vedomosti was one of Shternberg’s first, outlining a clan system he would later come to recognize as far less fixed than he first had perceived it. Given the swell of non-Gilyaks into the area, the increasing dislocations through travel and trade, and the demographic havoc wrought by disease, he realized that much of what he had been presented was an ideal system. This realization later found confirmation in the work of Soviet ethnographers such as Anna Smoliak, who pointed out that intermarriage with Gol’d (Nanai), Tungus (Evenki), and Manchurian Chinese prefigured the character of many Gilyak settlements in a way that made close adherence to the marriage rules described by Shternberg difficult. Anthropologist Chuner Taksami, himself a Nivkh, noted that actual examples of Shternberg’s labyrinthine systems were few. That the clan system may not have functioned as methodically as suggested, that group marriage was not as licentious as it sounded, that Shternberg himself was not wholly loyal to the Marxian strain of materialism for which Engels had conscripted him (Shternberg once called Marxism “a hackneyed reworking of the Hegelian triad”), or that Gilyaks at the turn of the century were far from an isolated tribe waiting to be discovered—were points that soon came to be lost in a handful of popular and scholarly accounts that entrenched Gilyaks in an edifice of evolutionary theory.

For Gilyaks of a century ago, there was considerable consequence in Shternberg’s chance reading of Engels on the eve of his Sakhalin exile. The irony is that for someone who set out to produce a sympathetic portrait of Gilyak life, one of the results of his path through evolutionism was to emphasize the more sensational aspects of primitive life held in popular thought. Many Russian ethnographers besides Shternberg followed the terminology of the day by making similar claims to group marriage in Siberia in the later 1800s. However, as anthropologist Peter

66 Radcliffe-Brown 1952, on 59. See also Hiatt 1996, on 54.
67 Murdock 1949, on 187.
68 Lévi-Strauss 1969, on 292, 301.
69 Smoliak 1975, on 86, 110.
70 Shternberg 1933a, on xxi.
Schweitzer has shown, few if any of the cases actually corresponded to Morgan’s criteria. What so many scholars and travelers claimed to document as group marriage more closely approximated extensive extramarital liaisons, and, in some cases, prostitution. The application of Morganian categories was itself awkward in Siberia because, as in Chukotka, for example, there were cases of virtually neighboring ethnic groups, effectively at the same “stage” of social development, with widely divergent kinship systems. One wonders how Gilyak life might have been perceived differently had their most famous ethnographer not foregrounded their social structure so prominently.

Retrospection

Why, ultimately, did classificatory kinship systems and the perceived customs of Gilyak group marriage so intrigue Shternberg? No doubt Shternberg’s evident pride in building on the works of mentors such as Marx, Morgan, and Engels give us the better part of this answer. For Shternberg the evolutionist, Gilyak group marriage provided a living illustration of where mankind had been at the very time when Russia was debating where to go.

However, we would be remiss not to also remember that kinship as an idiom had helped keep private lives public since the second half of the nineteenth century. At once a high modernist charting of order and rationality, kinship charted blood ties that were “everywhere an object of excitement and fear at the same time.” Blood, which could be inherited (dynamically), shed (militarily), and corrupted (by association) was a ready symbol of power relations that were of increasing importance to nineteenth and twentieth-century colonial administrations. A kinship idiom that worked at the interstices of “bodies and populations […] organized around the management of life rather than the menace of death,” Michel Foucault wrote, provided governments with new channels of insight into non-European worlds. With respect to Russia and the former Soviet Union’s relations toward Siberian indigenous peoples, this was very much the case.

Shternberg’s Gilyak work hinged on a European evolutionist paradigm that we could trace, of course, further back than Morgan. To be was to become, Hegel argued fifty years before Morgan, signaling a tradition of European Enlightenment consciousness so deeply rooted in change as a motor force of being that we could little contend to have broken away from it today. But with Shternberg’s work, as anywhere, knowledge was in the eye of the beholder. While Russian readers of Social Organization in the 1920s might have focused on its ethnographic contributions to a general evolutionist argument, by the 1930s Koshkin gave that evolution a distinctly Soviet twist, presenting Shternberg’s work as an important tool in the proletarian struggle against native backwardness.

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72 Foucault 1990, on 148.
73 Ibid.
74 Hegel 1988.
For the modern reader, Shternberg’s algebraic kinship formulae, which at their apex resemble permutations and combinations reminiscent of the high-speed digital computing that Lévi-Strauss pledged would revolutionize myth analysis, evoke at times high modernism more than marriage. Indeed, the functioning of Gilyak marriage rules as a system is perhaps what stands out most today, as it may have for Shternberg himself, who later in life conceded the simplicity of his original castings of Gilyak group marriage by writing, “I took them all for pure-blooded aristocrats.” Many decades later, some Nivkh readers of Social Organization have taken this admission one step further. When asked in 1995, Elizaveta Merkulova, an accountant from a North Sakhalin shipping port who had grown up in a Gilyak village in the taiga, said,

I’ve read those stories about how a man would offer his wife to a visitor for the night, but I can’t believe any of it. When I was young, my Russian friends would even ask me about it. Everyone thinks it’s what we used to do. But I can’t believe it, because I remember how jealously all my mother’s and father’s families treated women. They were unbelievably protective and jealous. Among [Gilyaks] at least, I mean, I just don’t see it. Think of all the instances of men killing their wives out of jealousy. It used to happen more frequently when I was young but it happens today. So, to imagine that a man would just offer his wife to another under those circumstances, it seems impossible. It was all a big Russian fantasy.

Yet, if the idea of group marriage has not held up well, Merkulova only smiled when I told her that parts of Shternberg’s text left me feeling that I, too, had fallen prey to “the almost hypnotic effect” of Gilyak kinship terms:

You find it difficult? I don’t find it difficult, but that’s probably because I grew up with it. I think a lot gets lost in the translation since there are some words that just don’t really have translations. Even if you take the simplest words like imk and itk: Everyone thinks that this means “mother” and “father” and that’s true. But neither of those words really give you a sense of what it’s like when everyone is connected to each other through formal relations. There’s no context to place these words when you have to start saying “the son of the sister of my father”! Whereas we would just say pu […] and you say it knowing that everyone is connected to everyone else in some important way.

Merkulova’s response was a laurel branch to the uninitiated, but she also reminds us why kinship became such a long-reigning and often dazzling way of accessing other people’s worlds, promising at once an objective force of reason and a hopeful insight into subjective lives. Shternberg’s own evolution of thought on Gilyak kinship reminds us that the elegance of kinship constructions can sometimes be misleading. As Greg Urban has noted, “Kinship terms seem to us to be closely related to one another—pieces of a jigsaw puzzle—because we, in fact, treat them that
way in our discourse practices.” 79 Hence, when Lévi-Strauss wrote, “A human
group need only proclaim the law of marriage with the mother’s brother’s daugh-
ter for a vast cycle of reciprocity between all generations and lineages to be organ-
ized, as harmonious and ineluctable as any physical or biological law,” harmony
may have also been in the eye of the beholder.80 Gilyak marriage rules were evi-
dently not only difficult for Gilyaks themselves to follow, Gilyaks may never have
followed them as religiously as Shternberg avowed.

In the decades of Sovietization that followed Shternberg’s first drafts of Social
Organization, the kinds of local knowledge and social circumstances that made
Gilyak marriage rules possible have long since been transformed. As the Nivkh
ethnographer Galina Dem’ianovna Lok blurted out when we both sat sequestered
in the confines of a North Sakhalin oil town in 1995, reading the entire text
aloud to each other for review, “You would have to have a head bigger than an
entire House of Soviets to understand this!” citing the monumental government
buildings that dominated the most important cities of the world’s first socialist
state. And yet for all the passage of practice, to some Nivkhi even the most com-
plicated of marriage rules have not lost, in Shternberg’s words, their “mnemonic-
adjudicating force.” To historians of anthropology, Shternberg’s work invites us to
reflect on one people’s experience of being represented through a language of kin-
ship that became the discipline’s flagship idiom in the twentieth century. To Nivkhi a century after Shternberg first came and went, he offers a portrait of lives
once lived, and the terms of address that still reconstitute that world.

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