

Gilyak

also known as "Nivkh"

Data source: eHRAF

Secondary source

Entered by Emily Pitek, Human Relations Area Files

** Data Source entry, prepared based on data sourced from an external project.*

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Entry tags: Animist, Religious Group

The Gilyak (otherwise known as Nivkh), are a group of people who live mostly on the island of Sakhalin, which is a part of Russia. The Gilyak religion is animistic, and characterized by the belief that animals and the ecological elements (mountains, rivers, the sea) possess spirits, with each having their "master" god. Clans unite over shared religious festivals and mythology. Shamans are believed to possess supernatural abilities, and are important figures in the treatment of illness, as well as communication with supernatural beings. This entry considers the Gilyak religious group to be coterminous with the society itself, and focuses on the time of 1890.



Date Range: 1865 CE - 1900 CE

Region: Sakhalin Island

Region tags: Asia, Russia

Sakhalin Island, Russia, ca. 1890

Status of Participants:

✓ Elite ✓ Religious Specialists ✓ Non-elite (common people, general populace)

Sources

Print sources for understanding this subject:

- Source 1: Murdock, G.P. (1967). *Ethnographic Atlas*. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Source 1: Divale, W. 2004. Codebook of Variables for the Standard Cross-Cultural Sample. *World Cultures: The Journal of Cross-Cultural and Comparative Research*.
- Source 2: Tuden, A. & Marshall, C. (Oct., 1972). Political organization: Cross-cultural codes 4. *Ethnology*, 11(4), 436-464.
- Source 3: Murdock, G.P. & Wilson, S.F. (Jul., 1972). Settlement patterns and community organization: Cross-Cultural Codes 3. *Ethnology*, 11(3), 254-295.

Online sources for understanding this subject:

- Source 1 URL: <http://ehrafworldcultures.yale.edu/document?id=rx02-000>
- Source 1 Description: Austerlitz, R. (2010). *Culture Summary: Nivkh*. New Haven, Conn.: Human Relations Area Files.
- Source 2 URL: <http://ehrafworldcultures.yale.edu/document?id=rx02-001>

– Source 2 Description: Shternberg, L. Ia., Bromwich, L., & Ward, N. (1933). Gilyak, Orochi, Goldi, Negidal, Ainu: Articles And Materials. Khabarovsk: Dal'giz.

General Variables

Membership/Group Interactions

Are other religious groups in cultural contact with target religion:

– Yes

Notes: The Gilyak are in contact with Russians and Russian religions, as exemplified in the following ethnographic evidence: "The Gilyak, however, willingly and with full faith, are treated by the Russians, not, of course, because they believe in the power of science, but for completely peculiar reasons. 'The Russian god,' they reason, 'is stronger than the Gilyak one; this means that the Russian shaman is stronger than the Gilyak one.' And if you inquire why the Russian god is stronger than the Gilyak one, you might hear such an answer: 'Behold how many centuries the Gilyak has been living here, and he still travels on paths, but the Russian arrived and immediately built wide roads, such roads as the Gilyak has never seen.' It is curious that neither steamboats nor automobiles, nothing impresses the Gilyak and convinces him of the superiority of the Russian god over the Gilyak one as much as just these roads" (Shternberg, Bromwich, and Ward, 1933:124).

↳ Is there violent conflict (within sample region):

– Yes

Notes: SCCS Variable 1649, Frequency of internal warfare (resolved rating), (original code 3.75) indicates that internal warfare seems to occur between once every 2 years, and once every year but usually only during a particular season (Ember and Ember, 1992; Retrieved from Divale, 2004).

↳ Is there violent conflict (with groups outside the sample region):

– Yes

Notes: SCCS Variable 1650, Frequency of external warfare (resolved rating), (original code 3.75) indicates that external warfare seems to occur between once every 2 years, and once every year but usually only during a particular season (Ember and Ember, 1992; Retrieved from Divale, 2004).

Does the religious group have a general process/system for assigning religious affiliation:

– No

Notes: Because the religion is coterminous with the society, there is not a concept of assigning religious affiliation aside from being born into a specific clan.

Does the religion have official political support

– No

Notes: The Gilyak do not have an official political office, so there is no means of giving the religion official political support.

Size and Structure

Number of adherents of religious group within sample region (estimated population, numerical):

– Estimated population, numeric: 4500

Notes: "The small tribe of Gilyak, whose number at the present time does not exceed four and a half thousand persons..." (Shternberg, Bromwich, and Ward, 1933:48).

Are there recognized leaders in the religious group:

– Yes

Notes: "Among the Gilyak, the shamans are chosen ones, who in night visions or in a trance receive a revelation from the god-protector about their high calling. From that moment the shaman has gods-assistants, executors of his commands. These gods-assistants are of two kinds: the kekhn and the kenckh" (Schternberg, Bromwich, and Ward, 1933:121).

↳ Are leaders believed to possess supernatural powers or qualities:

– Yes

↳ Powers are acquired by individual deeds carried out in past lives:

– No

Notes: (Schternberg, Bromwich, and Ward, 1933:121)

↳ Powers are acquired by individual deeds carried out in the current life:

– No

Notes: (Schternberg, Bromwich, and Ward, 1933:121)

↳ Powers are inherited:

– No

Notes: (Schternberg, Bromwich, and Ward, 1933:121)

↳ Powers are culturally transmitted from a supernatural being:

– Yes

Notes: "Among the Gilyak, the shamans are chosen ones, who in night visions or in a trance receive a revelation from the god-protector about their high calling. From that moment the shaman has gods-assistants, executors of his commands. These gods-assistants are of two kinds: the kekhn and the kenckh" (Schternberg, Bromwich, and Ward, 1933:121).

↳ Powers are culturally transmitted from another human (e.g. teacher):

– No

Notes: (Schternberg, Bromwich, and Ward, 1933:121)

↳ Are religious leaders chosen:

– Yes

Notes: "According to the views of the Gilyak, the shamans are chosen beings...In order to become a shaman, it is necessary to be liked by a kekhn, or to receive such a kekhn from one's father or uncle" (Shternberg, Bromwich, and Ward, 1933:125).

↳ Communication with supernatural power(s) believed to be part of the selection process:

– Yes

Notes: "...the Gilyak view of the shaman as a special being, as one chosen by the gods" (Shternberg, Bromwich, and Ward, 1933:126).

Scripture

Does the religious group have scriptures:

Scripture is a generic term used to designate revered texts that are considered particularly authoritative and sacred relative to other texts. Strictly speaking, it refers to written texts, but there are also "oral scriptures" (e.g. the Vedas of India).

– No

Notes: No ethnographic evidence for the presence of scripture among the Gilyak.

Architecture, Geography

Is monumental religious architecture present:

– No

Notes: According to SCCS variable 66, Large or impressive structures, no large or impressive structures are present (Murdock and Wilson, 1972; Retrieved from Divale, 2004).

Are there different types of religious monumental architecture:

– No

Notes: According to SCCS variable 66, Large or impressive structures, no large or impressive structures are present (Murdock and Wilson, 1972; Retrieved from Divale, 2004).

Are there specific sites dedicated to sacred practice or considered sacred:

– Yes

Notes: See questions below for more detail.

↳ Are sacred site oriented to environmental features:

"Environmental features" refers to features in the landscape, mountains, rivers, cardinal directions etc...

– Yes

Notes: "The Gilyak calls his native island 'mif' (the earth). It is a living, divine creature, whose 'head' (Cape Marii) and 'chin,' 'Pytykry,' lie in the Sea of Okhotsk, while its 'legs' are two peninsulas in the Korsakov okrug which lie in La Pérouse Strait" (Shternberg, Bromwich, & Ward, 1933:91).

Beliefs

Burial and Afterlife

Is a spirit-body distinction present:

Answer "no" only if personhood (or consciousness) is extinguished with death of the physical body. Answering yes does not necessarily imply the existence of Cartesian mind/body dualism, merely that some element of personhood (or consciousness) survives the death of the body.

– Yes

Notes: "The difference in the number of souls according to rank applies only to the so-called large souls, i. e., souls equal to a man's body in size and during his life pervading the entire organism. But, in addition to these large souls, each man also has small souls located in the head of the large soul, after whose death the small soul turns into a large one and becomes a duplicate of the deceased one" (Shternberg, Bromwich, and Ward, 1933:127).

Belief in afterlife:

– Yes

Notes: "It is very easy to get to the mlyvo [afterworld]. Somewhere on the surface of the earth there is an opening (mortal men do not know exactly where this place is); the soul need only descend into this opening and it reaches its goal. There everything is as it is here: the same earth, the same sky, sea, rivers, and forests; only there the sun shines when we have night, and the moon when we have day. The dead come to life and continue to live there in the same settlements as on earth, fish, kill beasts, celebrate clan festivals, marry and procreate. Only the material status changes: the poor man becomes rich and the rich man poor. As you see, even among the Gilyak the poor men find their consolation not in this best of all possible worlds. Even in the new world, however, sickness and death await man. From there the soul must migrate into a third world, and so on until such time as the soul degenerates and turns into ever smaller and smaller beings, a small bird, a gnat, and, finally, ashes" (Shternberg, Bromwich, and Ward, 1933:127).



Is the spatial location of the afterlife specified or described by the religious group:

– Yes



Afterlife in vaguely defined "below" space:

– Yes

Notes: Shternberg, Bromwich, and Ward, 1933:127

Reincarnation in this world:

– Yes

Notes: "Sometimes souls are born again on our planet, completing again the infinite series of transformations. For the most part, however, that is the lot of women" (Shternberg, Bromwich, and Ward, 1933:127).

Are there special treatments for adherents' corpses:

– Yes

Notes: "Finally, the deceased is brought to that place where his remains will stay forever. Here his last bed on earth awaits him – a high, symmetrically arranged pile of wood, on which he is carefully placed with his face toward the west. For the last time the wife, the husband, the mother, if the deceased is young, the wife of the elder brother, if the deceased was unmarried, climb up to him and weep, and then, making a sacred fire by means of friction, they set fire to the platform from all sides. When the fire reaches the body of the deceased, everyone hastens to pay their last tribute to him by throwing pieces of firewood into the fire. Even small children take part in this. Four men stand on the sides and, with long poles, readjust the firewood and poke the body so that it will burn faster and better. At the same time they break the sled, kettles, and spears and kill the dogs, which frees the souls of these objects to follow the deceased... The ashes are covered with birch bark, and of the deceased there remains only ashes, in the literal sense of the word" (Shternberg, Bromwich, and Ward, 1933:129).

↳ Cremation:

– Yes

Notes: (Shternberg, Bromwich, and Ward, 1933:129)

↳ Mummification:

– No

Notes: No ethnographic evidence of mummification.

↳ Interment:

– No

Notes: No ethnographic evidence for the presence of internment.

↳ Cannibalism:

– No

Notes: No ethnographic evidence for the presence of cannibalism.

↳ Exposure to elements (e.g. air drying):

– No

Notes: No ethnographic evidence for the presence of exposing corpses to the elements.

↳ Feeding to animals:

– No

Notes: No ethnographic evidence for the presence of feeding corpses to animals.

Are grave goods present:

– Yes

Notes: "Before entering mlyvo, the soul waits to be equipped with everything necessary to go to the new land comfortably and richer. And so the deceased is dressed in his best garments and in silken robes. Everything that is put on the deceased must be new, fully embroidered, elegant, and durable. A man is dressed in one, three, or six pairs, generally a number of pairs divisible by three, and women in two, four, eight, etc. pairs. The most expensive spears, rifles, bows, and nets are taken from the storehouse – and the souls of all these objects set off with the deceased on his journey" (Shternberg, Bromwich, and Ward, 1933:128).

↳ Valuable items:

– Yes

↳ Significant wealth (e.g. gold, jade, intensely worked objects):

– Yes

Notes: "Before entering mlyvo, the soul waits to be equipped with everything necessary to go to the new land comfortably and richer. And so the deceased is dressed in his best garments and in silken robes. Everything that is put on the deceased must be new, fully embroidered, elegant, and durable. A man is dressed in one, three, or six pairs, generally a number of pairs divisible by three, and women in two, four, eight, etc. pairs. The most expensive spears, rifles, bows, and nets are taken from the storehouse – and the souls of all these objects set off with the deceased on his journey" (Shternberg, Bromwich, and Ward, 1933:128).

Are formal burials present:

– No

Notes: The bodies of the deceased are disposed of in a formal cremation ceremony. See Shternberg, Bromwich, and Ward, 1933 page 129 for a description of this ceremony.

Supernatural Beings

Are supernatural beings present:

– Yes

Notes: "The Gilyak calls the universe 'kurn,' but with this same word he denotes the concept of a personal, man-like god. With the word 'pal' he denotes mountain and the god – 'master' of the mountain; with the word 'tol' – the sea and the god of the sea. The universe is only the form which has been assumed by great image of the personal god, 'kurn.' The Gilyak calls his native island 'mif' (the earth). It is a living, divine creature, whose 'head' (Cape Marii) and 'chin,' 'Pytykry,' lie in the Sea of Okhotsk, while its 'legs' are two peninsulas in the Korsakov okrug which lie in La Pérouse Strait" (Shternberg, Bromwich, & Ward, 1933:91).

↳ A supreme high god is present:

– Yes

Notes: SCCS Variable 238, Religion: high gods (note, identical to Ethnographic Atlas column 34) indicates that "a high god present but otiose or not concerned with human affairs" (Murdock, 1962-1971; Retrieved from Divale, 2004). Because the high god is otiose, there is limited ethnographic information available.

↳ Non-human supernatural beings are present:

– Yes

Notes: "The animals whom the Gilyak worship, however, are not independent gods and not even deities in general; they are merely the subordinates of the real deities, the 'masters' of this or that element, this or that animal. These 'masters' in their form and likeness are those same Gilyak who, according to need, assume the form of this or that animal. These gods live in the forests, the mountains, and on the bottom of the seas and lead the same kind of life as the Gilyak themselves, have wives children, and clansmen. Like the Gilyak, they are mortal. For each of the elements one of these gods, 'yz' – master, is in command" (Shternberg, Bromwich, and Ward, 1933:97).

↳ Non-human supernatural beings have deliberate causal efficacy in the world:

– Yes

Notes: "The Gilyak calls his native island 'mif' (the earth). It is a living, divine creature, whose 'head' (Cape Marii) and 'chin,' 'Pytykry,' lie in the Sea of Okhotsk, while its 'legs' are two peninsulas in the Korsakov okrug which lie in La Pérouse Strait....the very 'Head' of the earth, which, according to the beliefs of the Gilyak, does not leave unpunished a sacriligious offense against it by the feet of mortals" (Shternberg, Bromwich, and Ward, 1933:91).

↳ These supernatural beings can punish:

– Yes

Notes: "The Gilyak calls his native island 'mif' (the earth). It is a living, divine creature, whose 'head' (Cape Marii) and 'chin,' 'Pytykry,' lie in the Sea of Okhotsk, while its 'legs' are two peninsulas in the Korsakov okrug which lie in La Pérouse Strait....the very 'Head' of the earth, which, according to the beliefs of the Gilyak, does not leave unpunished a sacriligious offense against it by the feet of mortals" (Shternberg, Bromwich, and Ward, 1933:91).

↳ These supernatural beings have indirect causal efficacy in the world:

– Yes

Notes: "If the Gilyak sails on the sea and is afraid of a storm, he respectfully lowers a leaf of tobacco or a handful of rice over the side and says: 'Please make the sea calm, so that I may arrive home alive and healthy.' Whenever the Gilyak sets out, he takes along in a special sack his favorite objects for sacrifice, sweet herbs, sarana, and so forth – since the gods are not demanding" (Shternberg, Bromwich, and Ward, 1933:99).

↳ These supernatural beings exhibit negative emotion:

– Yes

Notes: "Up until now I have mentioned the gods that are beneficial to the Gilyak. Besides these, however, there are other supernatural beings who are evil and harmful to him. These devils are 'mil'k'i' and 'kinr'y.' These beings appear in all kinds of forms and are classified according to their degree of harmfulness" (Shternberg, Bromwich, and Ward, 1933:119).

↳ Mixed human-divine beings are present:

– Yes

Notes: "The clan gods of the Gilyak are not supernatural mythical beings, as among the Greeks and the Romans, but their very own clansmen who, for a variety of reasons, have entered the clan of one or another god 'master'" (Chternberg, Bromwich, and Ward, 1933:101).

Supernatural Monitoring

Do supernatural beings mete out punishment:

– I don't know

Notes: The following ethnographic excerpt provides evidence of supernatural punishment, but there are no further definitive examples of supernatural punishment. As such, it is difficult to come to a conclusion with certainty. "The Gilyak calls his native island 'mif' (the earth). It is a living, divine creature, whose 'head' (Cape Marii) and 'chin,' 'Pytykry,' lie in the Sea of Okhotsk, while its 'legs' are two peninsulas in the Korsakov okrug which lie in La Pérouse Strait....the very 'Head' of the earth, which, according to the beliefs of the Gilyak, does not leave unpunished a sacrilegious offense against it by the feet of mortals" (Shternberg, Bromwich, and Ward, 1933:91).

Practices

Membership Costs and Practices

Does membership in this religious group require celibacy (full sexual abstinence):

– No

Notes: "The permissive norms, which give both men and women such an extensive legitimate freedom in sexual relations, naturally must have given rise to general sexual laxity. In fact, the virtues of chastity, sexual moderation, and conjugal fidelity are unknown to the Gilyak" (Shternberg, Bromwich, and Ward, 1933:271).

Does membership in this religious group require constraints on sexual activity (partial sexual abstinence):

– No

Notes: "The permissive norms, which give both men and women such an extensive legitimate freedom in sexual relations, naturally must have given rise to general sexual laxity. In fact, the virtues of chastity, sexual moderation, and conjugal fidelity are unknown to the Gilyak" (Shternberg, Bromwich, and Ward, 1933:271).

Does membership in this religious group require castration:

– No

Notes: No ethnographic evidence for the presence of castration.

Does membership in this religious group require sacrifice of adults:

"Adults" here referring to an emic or indigenous category; if that category is different from the popular Western definition of a human who is 18-years-old or older and who is legally responsible for his/her actions, then please specify that difference in the Comments/Sources: box below.

– No

Notes: No ethnographic evidence for the presence of human sacrifice.

Does membership in this religious group require sacrifice of children:

"Children" here referring to an emic or indigenous category; if that category is different from the popular Western definition, please specify that different in the Comments/Sources: box below.

– No

Notes: No ethnographic evidence for the presence of human sacrifice.

Does membership in this religious group require self-sacrifice (suicide):

– No

Notes: No ethnographic evidence for the presence of human sacrifice.

Does membership in this religious group require participation in small-scale rituals (private, household):

– No

Notes: No ethnographic evidence for required participation in small-scale rituals.

Does membership in this religious group require participation in large-scale rituals:

I.e. involving two or more households; includes large-scale "ceremonies" and "festivals."

– Yes

Notes: The interclan bear festival is not necessarily mandatory, but is an important ritual that all feel obligated to participate in. "There is no compulsory organ to assemble products, to compel, demand, or control. Conscious of its obligation to participate in the common religious affair, each family works with all its might, not out of fear, not from conscience, cooks all sorts of dishes, helps with the chores, and contributes its mite, according to its means, toward the expense of the purchases. The money and supplies are handed over to the master of the bear, who disposes of them without control. No one reprimands anyone, for each one strives to make the festival come off most brilliantly" (Shternberg, Bromwich, and Ward, 1933:105).



What is the average interval of time between performances (in hours):

Performances here refers to small-scale rituals.

– I don't know

↳ Are there orthodoxy checks:

Orthodoxy checks are mechanisms used to ensure that rituals are interpreted in a standardized way, e.g. through the supervisory prominence of a professionalized priesthood or other system of governance, appeal to texts detailing the proper interpretation, etc.

– No

Notes: Shternberg, Bromwich, and Ward, 1933:105

↳ Are there orthopraxy checks:

Orthopraxy checks are mechanisms used to ensure that rituals are performed in a standardized way, e.g. through the supervisory prominence of a professionalized priesthood or other system of governance, appeal to texts detailing the proper procedure, etc.

– No

Notes: Shternberg, Bromwich, and Ward, 1933:105

Society and Institutions

Levels of Social Complexity

The society to which the religious group belongs is best characterized as (please choose one):

– A tribe

Notes: The Gilyak have no political authority beyond the local community, which is indicative of autonomous bands and villages (Ethnographic Atlas column 33, Murdock, 1967; retrieved from Divale, 2004). However, the Gilyak have patrilineal descent with dispersed sibs (Murdock and Wilson, 1972; Column 10: Descent [Note:Identical to SCCS Variable 72]). Additionally, the Gilyak live in segmented communities, and have patrilineal sibs. Source of information: Ethnographic Atlas (Murdock, 1967), Columns 19, 20, 22. Because the Gilyak have kin ties beyond the community, the society is best characterized as a tribe.

Education

Does the religious group provide formal education to its adherents:

– I don't know

Notes: Insufficient ethnographic information

Is formal education available to the group's adherents through an institution(s) other than the religious group:

– I don't know

Notes: Insufficient ethnographic information

Public Works

Does the religious group in question provide public food storage:

– No

Notes: According to SCCS variable 20, food storage, food is stored in individual households (Murdock and Morrow, 1970; Retrieved from Divale, 2004).

Does the religious group in question provide water management (irrigation, flood control):

– No

Notes: The Gilyak do not have irrigation. Source of information from Ethnographic Atlas (Murdock, 1962-1971), retrieved from Divale, 2004; Variables 203-207, 232.

Does the religious group in question provide transportation infrastructure:

– No

Notes: It can be assumed that transportation infrastructure is not present, as routes of land transport are "unimproved trails", according to Murdock and Morrow (1970; Retrieved from Divale, 2004; SCCS Variable 14).

Enforcement

Does the religious group in question provide an institutionalized police force:

– No

Notes: Tuden and Marshall (1972) column 10, Police (note, equivalent to SCCS variable 90, Police) indicates that "police functions are not specialized or institutionalized at any level of political integration, the maintenance of law and order being left exclusively to informal mechanisms of social control, to private retaliation, or to sorcery."

Does the religious group in question provide institutionalized judges:

– No

Notes: Tuden and Marshall (1972) column 9, Judiciary (note, equivalent to SCCS Variable 89, Judiciary) indicates that "supreme judicial authority is lacking at any level above that of the local community."

Does the religious group in question enforce institutionalized punishment:

– No

Notes: Because justice and social control are not institutionalized (see previous questions), it follows that punishment is not institutionally forced.

Does the religious group in question have a formal legal code:

– No

Notes: Because there is no formal social control among the Gilyak, it can be assumed that there is no formal legal code. Additionally, no ethnographic evidence indicates that a formal legal code is present.

Written Language

Does the religious group in question possess its own distinct written language:

– No

Notes: "An alphabet for the Nivkh language, based on the Latin script, was created in 1931..." (Austerlitz, 2010). This entry focuses around the time frame of 1880, which is prior to the introduction of a written Nivkh [Gilyak] language.

Food Production

Does the religious group in question provide food for themselves:

– Yes

Notes: The Gilyak rely mainly on fishing for subsistence. Hunting and gathering provide secondary sources of subsistence. Source of information from Ethnographic Atlas (Murdock, 1962-1971), retrieved from Divale, 2004; Variables 203-207, 232.



Please characterize the forms/level of food production [choose all that apply]:

– Gathering

– Hunting (including marine animals)

– Fishing

Notes: The Gilyak rely mainly on fishing for subsistence. Hunting and gathering provide secondary sources of subsistence. Source of information from Ethnographic Atlas (Murdock, 1962-1971), retrieved from Divale, 2004; Variables 203-207, 232.