

BOOK REVIEWS

EPIC OF THE SAKHALIN NIVKH PEOPLE



Vladimir Sangi. *Poselenie bukhty Chernoi zemli. Epos sakhalinskikh nivkhov*. Moskva: IP M.A. Smirnova, 2013. 432 pp.

The book titled *Epos sakhalinskikh nivkhov* (Epic of the Sakhalin Nivkh people), prepared for publication by the famous Nivkh writer, poet, and well-known Russian political figure Vladimir Sangi, is unique in many ways. Nivkh epic (in East-Sakhalin dialect *ɲastund*, *ɲastur*, in Amur dialect *nyzytyndɟ*, *nyzit*) has been known in academia by retelling for more than a hundred years (Sternberg 1900; Materials 1908). Apart from L. Sternberg, Nivkh epic was recorded by B. Pilsudski (see, e.g., Pilsudski 1996, 1999, 2003), E. Kreynovich¹, and G. Otaina (Otaina 1993: 171–208; Nivkh Myths 2010: 67–113). However, this publication happens to be the first in which the epic is presented not in a brief prose retelling, the way it could be recorded by researchers before audio recording devices appeared, but in the form of decoded tales which are sung, namely as a poetic, versicular text. More than a hundred years before the publication of this book, L. Sternberg quite rightly wrote in his famous volume of specimens of the Nivkh epic:

There is nothing easier than to have a chance to listen to a Gilyak storyteller. But it is extremely difficult to record him. First of all, a Gilyak speaks extremely fast, and, moreover, the language of a storyteller is archaic – very different from the spoken one, and many Gilyaks themselves need clarification. In addition, there is a kind of poetry, so-called nastund, specimens of which are recited in ecstasy, often sung and with such a breakneck speed, howls, and modulations, that it is not only impossible to record, but often even to catch the general meaning of the sung text. (Materials 1908: x)

However, Vladimir Sangi managed to do it.

The epic text, *The settlement of the Black land's bay*, was performed by the Nivkh storyteller Hytkuk in 1974. The author of the recording does not tell the reader about the circumstances of the recording or of the storyteller herself, but from the introduction to the book we learn that Hytkuk's "[...] *nasturs* could last several days and nights with breaks for rest, eating, and sleeping. She kept in her mind all the minute details of an event, and revived them so authentically that the audience felt as if Hytkuk herself was a member of the action she was describing. She was so expressive in performing her songs that accompanied her words by emotions, particular facial expressions, hand gestures, exclamations, laughter, and sometimes by crying or long pauses [...]" (Gashilov

& Gashilova 2013: 14–15). What has been said one can experience deeply by listening to the nearly two hours of audio recording of the epic attached to the book on two CD-ROMs.

In our opinion, the composition of the book is commendable as well. It includes not only the original Nivkh text (4316 lines, pp. 20–147), but also a poetic translation of the epic into Russian, made by N. Tarasov (pp. 150–288), and an interlinear translation of the text, made by V. Sangi (4326 lines, p. 305–431). However, in this case, there is a lack of comments with regard to the principles of interlinear translation (taking into account different lengths of the original text and interlinear translation). Explanations concerning the principles of decoding of the sung text would also be appropriate. There is no doubt that the written text is authentic and lively: one can hear constant encouraging shouts from Vladimir Sangi on the record, but neither these shouts (except for a couple of shouts of “Khon!” in the very beginning (p. 20)²) nor the completely prosaic ending of the recording where Hytkuk is talking about herself, is mentioned in the published text.

The published epic text is certainly a fine example of the high epic style and is interesting also in its plot. In particular, we would like to mention the motif of the lonely hero, used in the unfolding of the epic story. The nameless hero is not just lonely. A small baby lies on its side on the main couch in the house, the length and width of which is eight fathoms, eats flies and spiders and defecates underneath him (pp. 305–314). Such exposure can be found in the epic traditions of different parts of the world, but in this case we would like to stress its absolute unity with the introduction of the *nyzit* of the Amur Nivkh people, recorded by G. Otaina:

A poor boy lived all alone in the house, eight fathoms wide and eight fathoms long. And he lay facing one direction only. There are lots of excrements behind him and urine in front of him. When a worm gets into his mouth he eats it instead of the meat of animals running around the ground; when a fly falls into his mouth he eats it instead of poultry meat. (Nivkh Myths 2010: 83)

It is unlikely that in this case one ought to talk about the fundamental difference between Nivkh Amur and Sakhalin folk traditions and specifically that “the folklore genre *nastur* exists only amongst islanders with a self-designation *nivgun*” (Gashilov & Gashilova 2013: 17), that is, only amongst the Nivkh people of Sakhalin. We believe we still know too little about the Nivkh folklore to be able to claim anything with full confidence.

In addition to the above-mentioned extra audio material, the book is also embellished with 16 magnificent colour illustrations drawn by Vladimir Sangi (pp. 289–304). They help to better understand the sometimes quite complex patterns involved in this epic.

This publication can hardly be called academic but, nevertheless, the book as a whole is highly commendable. It will be useful to all who are engaged in folklore and ethnography of the peoples of the Far East, especially linguists and specialists in the Nivkh language.

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Acknowledgements

This review was written within the framework of the project, *Man in a Changing World: Problems of Identity and Social Adaptation in History and at Present* (the RF Government grant No. 14.B25.31.0009).

Notes

- ¹ Recordings of E. Kreynovich are stored at the Institute of Russian Literature of the Russian Academy of Science (The Pushkin House) in St. Petersburg. More about the Nivkh linguistic materials of Kreynovich, see Mamontova 2015: 187.
- ² An interesting fact is that in the interlinear translation this exclamation was given seven times at the beginning of the text, after which it was mentioned that the author gives no further references of this evidence of the live communication between the storyteller and the listener (p. 310).

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CHANGE AND SURVIVAL AT BERING STRAIT

Igor Krupnik & Michael Chlenov. *Yupik Transitions: Change and Survival at Bering Strait, 1900–1960*. Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 2013. 391 pp.

The fundamental treatise, *Yupik Transitions*, written by Washington-based anthropologist Igor Krupnik and his Moscow co-author, anthropologist Michael Chlenov, is devoted to the history of the Asian Yupik society in the 20th century, more precisely 1900–1960. The book is mostly based on the research conducted by the authors in Soviet Chukotka between 1971 and 1990. Igor Krupnik and Michael Chlenov interviewed elders who remembered the 1910s–1950s. These informants had been actors and observers of crucial changes in coastal Chukotka. It is impossible to overestimate the value of the memories of these

Yupik elders, enabling the anthropologists to reconstruct not only such historic events as the onset of collectivisation, establishment of the Soviet socio-cultural system and relocations of the 1950s, but also the complicated cultural traits of a so-called contact-traditional society. An abundant collection of Yupik accounts gathered by Igor Krupnik was published in Russian in 2000.¹ Here the authors draw a fascinating picture of the pre-relocation society based on the interviews published in the former book.

The structure of the book under review is a little confusing and requires attention to understand its logic. The first chapter – *Contact-Traditional Society, 1900–1923* – is dedicated to the description of the Yupik-newcomers' relations in the first quarter of the 20th century; mostly interaction between the indigenous population and American

