

LAYERS OF MEANING: CLOTHING ON THE AMUR

SUDHA RAJAGOPALAN ©



RMV 1202-267. A woman's coat made of fish skin.

Colophon

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Layers of meaning: clothing on the Amur

Introduction

In the Amur region of southern Siberia, the production of clothing and the beliefs associated with its making and wearing reveal an extreme fluidity of boundaries between the human and animal world. This publication discusses the clothing cultures of two groups – the Nivkhi and Orochi. It explores the making of clothing, the motif patterns peculiar to this region, sewing as a woman's preserve, and the changes in Amur clothing from the pre-Soviet to the post-Soviet period.

I. The collection

The National Museum of Ethnology in Leiden possesses a significant collection of jackets, boots, shirts, mittens, caps, sewing implements and related objects from two peoples of the East Siberian Amur region: the Nivkhi and Orochi.

Adolf Vasilivich Dattan

This collection dates back to 1898. The collector Adolf Dattan presented approximately 500 objects to the museum.



Adolf Vasilivich Dattan (1854 to 1924) was a merchant working for the German Trading House Kunst & Albers, which was established in Vladivostok in 1864. Dattan joined the company in 1874. He bartered with representatives of the different native peoples in the Amur area. In the course of his economic activities he was able to gather a considerable amount of artefacts from the region. He donated several collections of about 500 objects each to European museums in Leiden, Oslo, Braunschweig and Vienna. After the outbreak of World War I he was accused of being a German spy and exiled to Kolpaschewo, north of Tomsk. At the end of the war Dattan left Russia, never to return again.

Apart from clothing the Dattan collection in the National Museum of Ethnology (serial number 1202) consists of animal skins, utensils, fishing and hunting gear, amulets, models of houses and boats, etcetera, which together give a fair representation of the material culture of the Nivkhi and Orochi at the end of the nineteenth century.

II. People of the Amur

Seven distinct groups inhabit the Amur region. They are the Nanai (c.11.000), Negidal (c. 500), Oroks (c. 500), Udege (c. 2.000), Ulchi (c. 3.000), Nivkhi (c. 5.000) and Orochi (c. 1.500).



Nanai man and woman in traditional clothing. The photograph possibly has been made in photo studio in Khabarovsk. (Photo Baron von Lühdorf, c. 1870.)

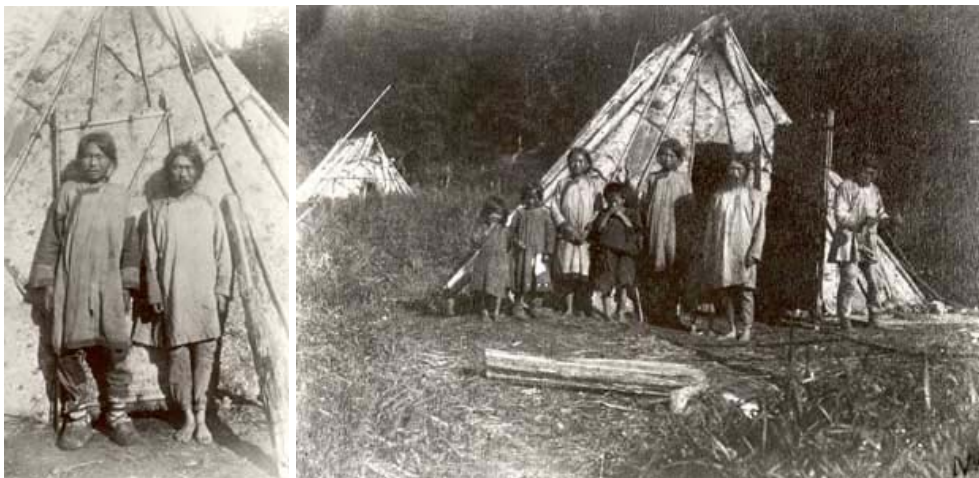
These groups have interacted with each other and with the neighbouring Chinese, Manchu, Koreans, Japanese and Russians for centuries. These Amur groups have distinctive identities. Yet centuries of sharing ideas and materials have led to similar material cultures, economies, belief systems and rituals.

Environment



Map of the dwelling area of the Nivkhi and Orochi

The Nivkhi inhabit the region of the lower reaches of the Amur River, the Okhotsk coastal area and the northern part of the Sakhalin Island. The Orochi are the southern neighbours of the Nivkhi.



Two Orochi men (left) with their family (right) in front of a summer dwelling made out of birch bark. In summer, the Amur peoples moved from winter settlements to summer dwellings in the coastal area in order to fish. This photo was taken when the family stayed near Barracuta Bay, along the southeast coast of Siberia. (Photo A. Dattan, c. 1880)

They too live along the lower reaches of the Amur River and in the Khabarovsk region. The Nivkhi have exercised substantial influence on the Orochi, so that their material cultures and symbolic systems display many similarities.



Nivkhi dog sledge setting off in winter in Nikolayevsk-na-Amure. At the end of the nineteenth century, the mail was delivered to the villages by means of dog sledge transportation. The wooden houses in the settlement were built in Russian style. (Photo Baron von Lühdorf, c. 1870)

The Amur region's proximity to the sea causes this region to experience a higher humidity than elsewhere in Siberia. The summers bring more than moderate rainfall accompanied by a south-westerly wind, and the winters see heavy snowfall. Agriculture is rendered impossible by the climate.¹



The coastline near the town of Alexandrovsk-Sakhalin (Photo courtesy Cecilia Odé, 2001)

This area is thickly forested with towering pine trees, interspersed with rivers. The rich mixed forests of the **Taiga**² provide the inhabitants of the region with edible grasses, medicinal herbs such as ginseng, and fruits. Nettle fibres are used as thread for sewing skins.³

Until the early decades of the twentieth century, inhabitants of this region lived entirely off fishing and hunting and are known to have enjoyed strong trade ties with their neighbours. Hunting and fishing had provided food and clothing for centuries. Women and men wore fish skin (especially salmon skin) robes and winter clothing made of animal furs. Animals, mammals and fish were a much-needed source of food and clothing, and are an essential part of the Amur people's worldview.

Fluidity between cultures

The people of the Amur know a long, cosmopolitan history. In ancient times, trade routes passed from China and Mongolia through this region. Several peoples of the Turkic, Mongolian and Manchu-Tungus linguistic groups have travelled down the Amur route since antiquity. They have either remained in this region or moved on to new territory since then.

Neolithic history of the Amur has left a legacy of pottery, which bears similarities to that of Korea and Japan. There are also similarities between the motifs on Amur petroglyphs dating back 5000 years showing cosmic serpents and dragons, and the aboriginal art of the more distant North America, Indonesia and Polynesia.

In the first and second centuries AD, the region of the Amur, Korea and Japan formed a cohesive cultural entity. Chinese imperial power extended into the Amur region in the seventh century AD and would continue to exercise authority in the region until the Russians arrived.⁴ This period of Chinese imperium has left an indelible imprint on Amur material cultures.



Two photographs of Chinese merchants at Nikolayevsk-na-Amure. (Photos Baron von Lühdorf, c. 1870)

Russian expansion into Siberia started in the mid 1600s. This began with the flight of peasants from European Russia into the region, then the exile of prisoners, and eventually the movement of traders in search of pelts. Russian colonization of the region was accompanied by several ethnographic expeditions to establish the “backwardness” of the local peoples of Siberia. Russian and western ethnographers of the 19th century have left us graphic accounts of the lives of the Amur people.



Oroch family inside a wooden house. Amur region, late nineteenth century.

Their accounts of the Nivkhi and Orochi have continued to function as good basic sources for the material cultures of this region. In 1858 the port of Vladivostok was established. It was to become an international haven for Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Russian and local traders.



View of the old centre and harbour of the city of Vladivostok. (Photo Baron von Lühdorf, 1873)

The expansion of Russian control in the region was formalized when the region was sovietized in the 1920s.⁵



Russian residents of Alexandrovsk-Sakhalin praying in the local Russian Orthodox Church. (Photo courtesy Cecilia Odé, 2001)

Sovietization of Amur cultures

The policy of the state with regard to the Amur peoples changed with each new regime. Lenin praised them as a nationality that had been ruthlessly suppressed by the Russian Tsar. The purges of so-called enemies of the state under **Stalin**⁶ affected not only political rebels but also artists, writers, bureaucrats and rich peasants. Those who were perceived as acting against the interests of the state (defined broadly) were executed or simply disappeared without a trace. In the Amur region, traditional religion was banned and shamans were purged.

The changes brought about by the Sovietization of the Amur in the 1920s were far reaching.



Nivkhi men, women and children (left) in a winter settlement at the edge of the taiga. Their dress is still mostly traditional and typical for the Amur region. Two Nivkhi men (right), wearing both traditional and Russian style clothing. Amur region, c. 1930.

Russification of the Amur peoples meant the imposition of the Cyrillic alphabet where their own language would be written using the Latin alphabet. It meant the perpetuation of Russian as a 'national language.' Social mobility rested upon the degree to which you were Russianized.⁷ The school system ensured the marginalization of local languages and the imposition of Russian.

Materially, the lives of the Nivkhi and Orochi were also transformed. The Nivkhi and Orochi came to possess modern-day acquisitions such as radios, televisions, and sewing machines. The Amur landscape came to be dotted with Russian-style wooden dwellings.



Typical wood structures that characterize Russian rural homes became a common feature of the Amur landscape. (Photos courtesy Cecilia Odé, 2001)

In the pre-Soviet period their means of sustenance had primarily been fishing and hunting. In the Soviet period, the labour force was absorbed into the wage economy.⁸ Fishing and hunting had determined their belief systems and material cultures. Now with only a minority of the people engaging in these occupations, Nivkhi and Orochi society and culture have been radically transformed.



Fishermen on the river Tym (left) and the drying of fish, to render its skin suitable for use. (Photos courtesy Cecilia Odé)



"Nationalist in form, socialist in content" was the Soviet motto. The Soviet Union's image of itself was one of a nation of several nationalities, united in their socialist goals. Soviet ethnographers have expended much effort in research on non-Russian cultures of the Soviet Union and publications on the subject are numerous. Nationalist differences were permitted to some extent, but were always considered to be secondary to the socialist agenda of the state.⁹



Two Russian propaganda posters. On the left with the heads of Marx, Engels and Lenin, and under them a text saying: 'Marxism-Leninism, an everlasting doctrine' (RMV 5517-11). On the right a factory worker with the slogan: 'Bad work, that's not done!' (RMV 5517-13)

In the period of de-Stalinization (after Stalin's death in 1953) state-sponsored cooperatives encouraged the marketing of local, ethnic arts, and the wearing of ethnic clothes during civic festivities.



A Nivkh woman (left) and a group of women in traditional costumes while performing native songs and dances in a Russian theatre. The costumes combine traditional design, decorations and materials with modern fabrics. The dress is used in a new, modern context stressing Nivkh culture and identity. (c. 1975)

Thus, local traditions were linked to civic ceremonies. On the occasions that the Nivkhi were permitted to hold their traditional winter bear festival, they were required to make it coincide with the anniversary of the Bolshevik revolution in November.¹⁰

In the 1980's, **Michael Gorbachev**¹¹ introduced **perestroika**¹² and **glasnost**¹³ and proclaimed that non-Russian citizens were now free to resume a 'traditional' life.



Lenin still stands in Alexandrovsk-Sakhalin, bearing testimony to the past Sovietization of this region. (Photo courtesy Cecilia Odé, 2001)

III. Traditional clothing of the Amur people

Principles of Amur clothing

Until the early decades of the twentieth century, the Nivkhi and Orochi used mainly fish skin and animal furs for their clothing. The Orochi who lived between the inland rivers and the coast used reindeer and fish skin for clothing.¹⁴ In the second half of the nineteenth century the use of cotton and other textiles for making clothing increased substantially. The Amur peoples acquired cotton and silk through trade with the Chinese, Japanese and Russians, and used both mainly for summer clothing or Sunday afternoon get-togethers.¹⁵ Cotton was also considered suitable for funeral clothing and to dress corpses.

The use of fish skin or animal pelts for clothing speaks of the centrality of fishing and hunting in these cultures.



RMV 1202-196b. Dried skin of a salmon. The head end is pointed, the tail end is cut in a straight line.

The making of fish skin clothing (skin of salmon and carp is particularly suitable) characterizes the Nivkhi to the extent that early Chinese records of the people referred to them as 'fish skin tribes.'¹⁶ Their fish skin clothing distinguished them from other neighbouring groups and became a crucial marker of their identity.

Fish skin is light, supple, water-resistant, and durable and is therefore ideal for both shelter and clothing. But it is thin and not very effective at insulation. Jackets and shoes made of fish skin were supple and easy to use. It was mainly women who wore clothes of fish skin; their work inside the house made the thin fish skin jacket more appropriate.



Two women's coats made of fish skin. (RMV 1202-266 and 267)

Women wore such jackets until the mid 20th century and have now replaced them with Russian clothes. Men wore fish skin clothes in the summers rather than winters as their work was mainly outside the house. If they wore fish skin in the winter, it was a garment of two or several layers. Fish skin jackets could be worn over fur clothing as protection against moisture.¹⁷

Colours

Colours most frequently used in Amur decorative arts were red, blue, black and grey. White was considered undesirable due to its association with power, violence and death. Black was considered appropriate for festive clothing and grey or blue for undergarments.¹⁸ Men's jackets were darker than those of women while children's jackets were made of animal fur of different colours. Clothing was adorned with complex spiral patterns intermingled with plant and animal motifs, or figures of mythical beasts. The cut and style of garments is reminiscent of Chinese and Manchurian clothing.

Summer clothing

In the summer, both men and women wore textile robes that reached the knees (*larkch*). These robes were mostly grey, blue and black; occasionally red, yellow and white robes would also be worn.



A Nanai woman (left) in traditional dress made out of cotton and probably edged with fur. The woman is wearing traditional earrings and a nose ring. The photograph possibly has been made in a photo studio in Khabarovsk, late nineteenth century. Right a women's dress made of red cotton, and decorated with checkered and brown cotton (RMV 1202-9).

The style of the garment, with its opening to the right, demonstrates the influence of the neighbouring Chinese. The collar and hem were decorated. The men's robes were shorter than those of women. Women wore robes, which were adorned with metal cutwork on the borders. The metal discs or coins made a sound as women moved and announced their approach. Sometimes the borders were adorned with shells, and the collar with beads. In the robes of both women and men the edging was of a different, contrasting colour. In the summer, the fish skin jacket constituted the uppermost layer of clothing.

In the summer, men wore birch bark hats as protection against rain, or a cotton cap that was pulled down over the ears as protection against mosquitoes. The birch bark was typically adorned with red and black birch bark appliqués.



A hat of birch bark (left, RMV 1202-67) and a cotton cap (RMV 1202-30).



A Nivkh man (left) wearing a birch bark hat in summer. (Drawing L. von Schrenck 1881).

Summer boots were made of fish skin or dehaired seal skin; both are water resistant and good for rain. Women wore fish skin boots in both summer and winter.



A pair of fish skin boots for women. (RMV 1202-58).

Skins and pelts for the winter

The use of dog skin is a century-long tradition. The Nivkhi and Orochi used dogs as sledge-animals. Dog skin was of little or no value to the Russians and Chinese with whom the Nivkhi and Orochi traded. To the latter it was thus ideal for their own clothing. The coat made of a double layer of dog skin, reached the knees. The insulation principle was once again at work here. Warm air was effectively conserved between the two layers of dog skin. The inner coat was also made of dog skin with the fur side worn inwards.¹⁹ Coats made of black dog skin were precious due to the difficulty in finding matching skins.²⁰ The more prosperous Nivkhi possessed coats made of carefully matched dog skins.²⁰

The Nivkhi used seal or reindeer fur more discriminatingly. While hunting, men wore a skirt (*kosjk*) of seal fur that was resistant to snow and moisture.



RMV 1202-258. A skirt (*kosjk*) of seal fur.

This garment was most suitable for long sledge rides in heavy snow. A strip of fish skin or raw cotton was attached to the top hem of the skirt; and a string passed through it to help fasten the skirt. The hunters also wore a short jacket of sealskin.

The pelt of smaller animals was used for items of clothing that functioned as accessories. Scarves were made of the pelt of squirrels. Earmuffs had an inner layer of fox fur and sea otter hide, while the outer layer was made of cotton and embroidered with beautiful arabesque patterns. Sleeve binders made of cotton were usually tied around the arm to protect against wind and snow.



On the left a pair of earmuffs, worn by men in winter (RMV 1202-456). On the right a man's winter cap, made of thick padded Chinese cotton (RMV 1202-38).

The Nivkhi and Orochi wore a pelt cap over these earmuffs. A cap had two strings under the chin and was lined on the inside and along the borders with fox fur. The outside was made of small pieces of fur sewn together. In the winter while working outside the house, women wore an unadorned cap of blue quilted cotton. The cotton was acquired through trade with the Chinese.

The value of lynx and tiger pelts was extremely high at the end of the nineteenth century. The lynx cap was made with the ears of the animal sticking out on top of the cap, and the tail at the back of the cap. Men more often than women possessed one and wore it on special occasions such as the bear festivities. It was considered more elegant than a Chinese silk cap with the Chinese dragon motif on it. The tiger pelt was ascribed mythical significance. In fact, tiger pelts were placed on the throne of the Chinese emperor. A person with such pelts in her/his possession was considered to be wealthy and of high status.



A Nivkhi man and woman in winter clothing. The man is wearing a short fur coat, a seal skin skirt and seal skin boots. The woman is dressed in a fish skin coat, a textile robe with an edging of metal plates, and seal skin boots. (Drawing L. von Schrenck 1881)

Clothing accessories

Women wore a breast warmer made of cotton or fur. It was pentagonal in shape. Worn directly on the naked body, it was fastened at the nape of the neck. Cotton leggings were fastened to the belt with cotton strings.



A breast warmer (left) and leggings (right) made of cotton (RMV 1202-453 and 454)

Ethnographic accounts of the Amur people's clothing are conflicting regarding the use of undergarments among these people. Some ethnographers wrote of the use of a loincloth as an undergarment. The museum collection has one piece of clothing that resembles a loincloth; perhaps this did function as an undergarment.

Footwear

Men's winter boots were made of reindeer or seal fur.



Man's boots for winter ("ki") with high legs, made of seal fur (*Phoca larga*) and a sole of dehaired seal skin (RMV 1202-263)

Women's footwear remained unaffected by seasonal factors, since their work continued to be domestic or restricted to the village. They wore fish skin boots in the summer and winter. The boots were supple and thin, therefore suitable for work in and around the house.²¹ Additionally, they wore stockings (sometimes termed 'inner boots') made of pelt with the fur side worn directly over the naked skin. The boots were slipped on over the stockings with the fur side worn outwards. Between the sole of the stocking and the inner sole of the boots, the Nivkhi and the Orochi wore grass insoles.

Belts with accessories such as needle cases, knives, flint and tinder attached were worn by both women and men.

Jewellery

Men and women wore spiral-shaped earrings made of copper or silver wire. More intricately made earrings had interlocking spirals that were offset by jade discs and glass beads.



RMV 1202-112 A pair of earrings.

The earrings had more than just a decorative function. It was believed that holes in the earlobes must be preserved. The souls of those with unpierced ears would be unable to enter the portals of the kingdom of the dead. When babies were born with small holes in their lobes, the Nivkhi considered them to be the reincarnation of the soul of a dead kinsman.²²



A Nanai woman in traditional dress made out of cotton. She is wearing traditional earrings and a nose ring. The photograph possibly has been made in a photo studio in Khabarovsk. Baron von Lühdorf, c. 1870).

IV. Sewing – a woman’s preserve

The sewing of skins was an exclusively female preserve, just as hunting was a male preserve. Their relation to the animal world linked both these preserves. Men hunted prey, women transformed animal hides into clothing.



Nivkh seamstress wearing a homemade robe decorated with traditional embroidery. She is making a knot in a sewing thread.

The transformation of animal skin into clothing worn close to the human body imbued the sewing process with power. Amur people depended on the animal world for their survival and care was taken that the animal spirit was not offended. Clothing had to be painstakingly, carefully and beautifully made. The clothing made of animal skins connects the human with the animal, which was invested with spiritual powers. The sewing of clothing enabled this transformation. Women as seamstresses were a catalyst for this transformation that was fundamental to the Amur people’s belief system.²³

Seamstresses were subject to restrictions and taboos. They were prohibited from sewing while the men were out hunting in case the act would offend the animal to be hunted and either cause the animal to flee or cause harm to befall the men. Nivkhi women who were pregnant never sewed clothing that could be worn outside the home or given to a stranger. By observing this taboo, they ensured the safe birth of their child.²⁴

Usually clothing or footwear was sewn in the autumns or winters. Cool temperatures rendered the skins more supple and the task of sewing easier. Besides, new clothing was needed for the winter.

Preparing the skins

When skin was prepared for clothing it was dried, scraped and softened. The tools and techniques were passed on from one generation to the next. Several factors influenced the process – the season, the eventual function for which the skin was to be used, the animal species and local custom. Dog skin was scraped and kneaded by men until it was soft, and women continued the kneading until the skin was ready for use. Women generally prepared fish skins for clothing.

Men and women used knives, scrapers and other tools to make the skin smooth. On the Amur, women used narrow long bladed knives to skin fish and shorter ones for purposes of carving out the intricate patterns for fish skin ornamentation.



A knife (left) and a scraper (right), RMV 1202-148 and 180.

The knives used for preparing fish skin were a woman's treasured tools and worn close to her, on her belt. Knives used for appliqué work had hilts that displayed stylised motifs, mainly animal and plant symbols, which are believed to facilitate contact with benevolent spirits.

Scrapers were used to remove the uppermost layer of tissue on the skin. A hammer and platform combination was used to smoothen the skin before stitching.



A hammer (left) and a workplank (right), RMV 1202-228 and 137.

Women usually used a workplank meant exclusively for the activities that were their preserve – preparing fish or animal skin and sewing.

Sewing implements

Needles and awls

The people of the Amur used needles and awls made of fish, reindeer or bird bones, ivory or hand-forged iron. The size of the needles varied according to the thickness of the hides to be sewn. In the last decades steel needles of Russian manufacture have replaced them.

Sinews, fibres, threads

Birch bark and fish skins were sewn with reindeer sinew or fish skin thread. Animal sinew is particularly strong and less prone to fray. Sinew collected from one reindeer is enough to sew an entire **parka**. The sinew was collected from along the spine and the legs of the reindeer. As riverine people, the Nivkhi and Orochi used fish more optimally than other cultural groups. After drying and softening the skin, it was cut into a long narrow strip that was used as thread.



Bundled threads made of reindeer sinew (RMV 1202-201).

For the purpose of sewing pelts together, nettle and hemp fibres were also used as thread; for cotton clothes they used cotton threads. The Taiga was an abundant source of nettle and other plant fibres that were spun into thread. These were not as durable as animal or fish sinew but more widely available. Coloured thread acquired through trade with China, was used for embroidery.

Patchwork and purses

The Nivkhi and Orochi adorned their clothes with elaborate designs and motifs. For this they used fish skin or birch bark appliqué patterns, which they glued on to the surface of the garment.



Birch bark appliqué (RMV 1202-74).

In the case of cloth garments, designs were embroidered. Layers of fish skin rendered supple and smooth are glued together using fish-glue. Colours and designs were used alternately on the layers until a multi-coloured, multi-layered effect was achieved. Girls who were skilled in the art of appliqué and embroidery were considered to be eminently eligible to be brides.

Needle cases made of ivory or bone are used to store needles, thread and thimbles. These cases are stored in a sewing bag or attached to a woman's belt. Sewing bags made either of birch bark or reindeer skin, were used to carry needle cases and decorative panels used for embroidery. Decorative panels made of birch bark were valued inheritances passed on from mother to daughter.

V. Motifs and their inspiration

Fluidity between environments

Several customs perpetuate the continuum between the animal and human worlds. In the Amur worldview, animals are spiritual beings, to which offers must be regularly made in order to appease their spirits. The bear was believed to be the master of the Taiga, and may simultaneously have represented human ancestors. Offerings were also made to less powerful creatures such as seals. Hunted animals were treated with respect. The tradition of parading through the village after a successful hunt had as its purpose the honouring of the animal spirits.²⁵ Simultaneously it was a symbolic act of validation, extolling the prowess of the hunter and his exploits in the community. Women engaged in the transformation of pelts and skins into human clothing, and consequently, were subject to taboos. Decorations on clothing sought to keep evil away and pacify the spirits of the animal world.²⁶

The perception that the boundaries between the human and animal world are mutable and surmountable finds manifestation in not only beliefs and customs but also material culture. Until the twentieth century, the Amur cultures knew a wide variety of ornately ornamented objects – from clothing to knife hilts, purses to offering bowls. The depicted motifs represented benevolent spirits that performed a protective function – offering protection against those evil spirits that cause misfortune.

The decorations on clothing were also intended to appease the animal spirits and facilitate the capitulation of the hunted animal.²⁷ One might state that the human and animal world engaged in a perennial dialogue.

The question of origin

Early ethnographic and historical accounts of the Nivkhi stress the all-pervasive influence of the Chinese in the material cultures of the Nivkhi. Such accounts attribute all motif and design traditions in the Amur region to the Chinese and acknowledge little to be of indigenous origin. Nivkhi and Orochi material cultures evince, as do other material cultures of the Amur region, their long historical association with the Chinese. Attributed to Chinese influence are the bird motifs, dragon motifs and fish motifs in Amur art.²⁸ Yet decorative arts of the Amur do reveal indigenous motif traditions. A. Okladnikov traces motifs in Amur material culture to the ancient petroglyphs of **Sikhote Alin**.²⁹

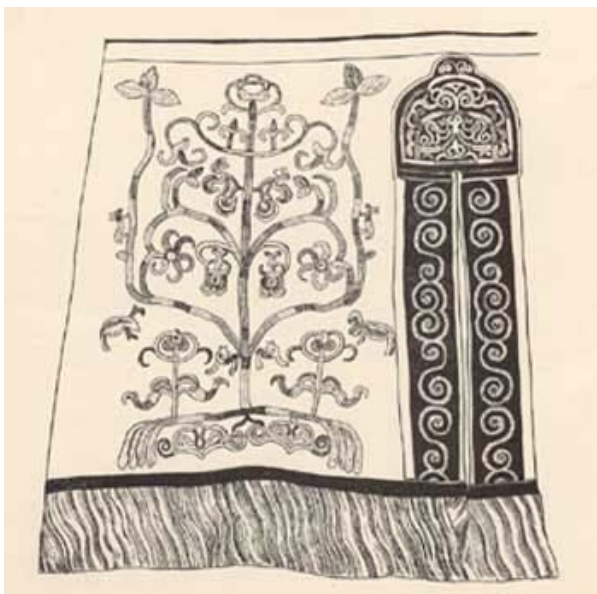
The petroglyphs, which date back approximately 5000 years, depict birds, spirals and masks. The same depictions can be found in Amur decorative arts of the nineteenth century and later.³⁰

People of the Amur attributed special powers to nature and fauna. Both find stylised and conventional representations in clothing. The stylised depiction of birds, fish, serpents and water is a series of elaborate curves or spirals with one or two distinctive characteristics of each motif interspersed in the pattern.

Tree of life

The tree of life symbol is a ubiquitous motif on Amur clothing and is derived from local mythology. The tree of life connects the upper world and the netherworld by passing through the middle world inhabited by humans.

Its roots are in the netherworld, pictorially depicted with fish, snake and lizard figures. The trunk of the tree passes through the human world. In this middle panel one finds depictions of forest animals familiar to the Amur people. The treetop represents the upper world where birds, as creators of the universe in Amur mythology, nestle.³¹



Tree of life motif. (Laufer 1902, pl. XXVI, fig. 5)

Bird motifs

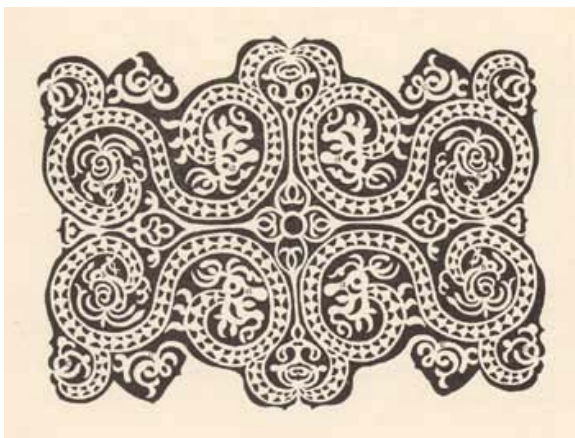
The bird motifs can be traced back to ancient petroglyphs of the Amur area, which often depict ducks, swans or geese. In some depictions, the birds are shown with wings spread, as if in flight. Birds are significant players in local myths of the creation of the universe. In some Amur myths it was diving birds, which created the earth while flying around with the earth and sand deposits from the bottom of the sea. According to the Nivkhi myth, it was the duck that created the land from its own feathers. Birds are associated with the soul. An unborn child or infant is said to be a reincarnated soul. On wedding robes, the depicted birds represent the as yet unborn children of the bride.³²



Bird motifs. (Laufer 1902, pl.VI, figs.1, 2 and 4)

Serpent, spiral or dragon motifs

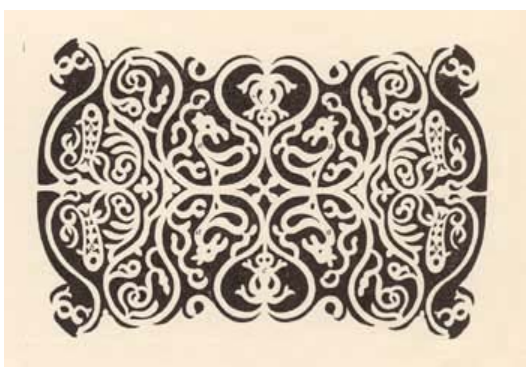
In local myths, the serpent is a benevolent creature and is attributed supernatural powers and wisdom. The serpent is also believed to be the creator of the universe in Amur mythology. Plunging from the skies into the earth, it created deep valleys and enough room to accommodate all earth's creatures. Its descent on earth is represented in spiral and zigzag patterns both on ancient petroglyphs and on more recent decorative arts of the Amur. The serpent is also represented as a dragon, cited often as an illustration of Chinese influence. The dragon then appears along with fish in the panel representing the netherworld, in the tree of life design.



Serpent motifs. (Laufer 1902, pl. XII, fig. 4)

Reindeer motifs

Other land animals familiar to the Amur people appear as motifs on clothing and other objects. On fish skin jackets, they appear in the tree of life panel work along the spine of the garment. The animals are depicted in the middle or human world. Often the depicted animal is a reindeer.



Animal motifs. Two toads can be seen in the centre, elks on the right and left and fishes on the uttermost ends of the picture. (Laufer 1902, pl. XIV, fig. 5)

Water symbolism

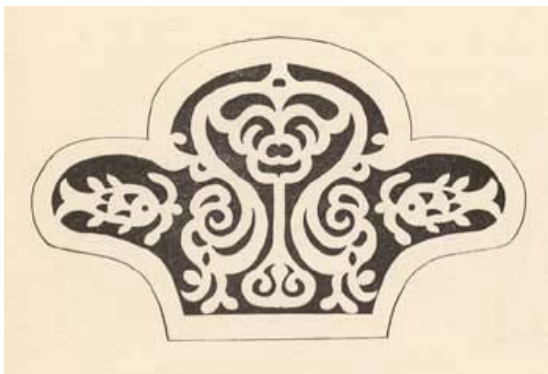
Water, both as river and sea, is a recurring motif in the belief system of the Amur people. Local legends suggest fluidity between land and water. In these narratives, hunters marry sea gulls or mammals and live on both water and land. When characters in legends cross the water, it is usually to begin a new phase of life. The water and the crossing thereof, is a metaphor for transformation. Water is also attributed healing properties in local lore.³³ Designs on clothing and other objects, in all their symmetry, twist and curve gracefully. Perhaps the flow of these spirals suggests the central place that water occupies in the lives of the Amur people.



Water symbolism (Laufer 1902, pl. XI, fig. 4)

Fish motifs

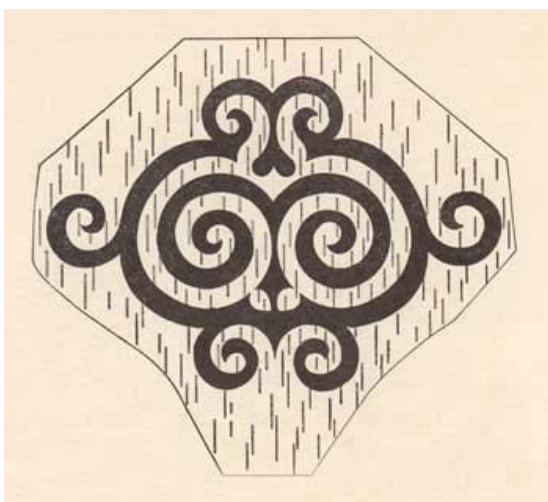
Fish appear in the tree of life design along with birds and animals. They are associated with the underworld and hence appear at the tree roots, in the lower panel of the design. The fluidity between the worlds is once more patent in the frequent depiction of birds with fish fins for tails, at the top of the tree. Fish was sometimes depicted in the bird's body – in all probability a reference to fish as the bird's prey.



Fish motifs (Laufer 1902, pl. XI, fig. 3)

Transformed masks

Masks drawn on the Sikhote Alin boulders 5000 years ago have been perpetuated in other forms of decorative art in the last centuries. Pottery dating back to the same period also bears similar mask like patterns. These ancient mask petroglyphs, when stylised, have spirals or fish figures for eyes and ears. It is probable that the masks were reproduced in a transformed manner on artefacts and clothes later. The mask motif on clothing and artefacts is a simian mask with a broad and round upper half and with eyes represented by double spirals. The broad nostrils and chin are distinctive. Spirals also suggest the ears and there are two ray-like projections on the top of the mask.³⁴ Small metal discs or coins depicting transformed masks were attached to the lower borders of women's shirts and fish skin jackets. These metal masks demonstrate remarkable continuity in the decorative traditions of the Amur people.³⁵



Transformed mask. The spirals in the middle symbolize anthropomorphic eyes; the two dots can be interpreted as nose holes, and under them an indication of a mouth (Laufer 1902, p. 17, fig. 3)

VI. Ornamentation and its reasoning

In a folktale of the Udege, another group in the Amur region, three girls attempted to get the better of the Master of the Wind by climbing to the mountain summit. Two girls had fine dresses made of imported Chinese fabrics. The third girl's dress was ordinary but was elaborately ornamented with depictions of birds, animals, snakes and rivers. The Master of the Wind blew ferocious storms to obstruct the girls' climb. The two girls with dresses made of fine fabrics were blown off the mountain, while the one with the finely embroidered dress reached the summit.³⁶

Motifs empowered and protected their wearer. They were not used randomly or indiscriminately on clothing. Often design patterns were intended to appease the spirits of the animal world, which provided the local people with food and clothing.³⁷ Objects and clothes bore different motif patterns, depending on their function and the wearer. Jackets, hats, footwear, mittens and earmuffs were adorned with embroidery or appliqué work.

Women's jackets were ornately embroidered. The front of these coats had border designs, but the back displayed more intricate designs with spirals and figures. Along the spine of the garment there was often a complicated pattern of arabesque motifs, birds, fish, tree of life and other symbolic motifs. The designs were passed on from generation to generation. It was probably possible for members of the larger community to distinguish one family from the other on the basis of the patterns.³⁸ Decorative panel work may have also served as markers of identity between villages.

Nina Beldi, a Nanai woman, explains the structuring of the design panels. She states that the upper world is represented by the upper borders, the middle world by designs in the centre, and the lower world by the designs on the hems of the jackets. According to the legends of the Nanai (whose material culture and symbolic system bear close resemblance to that of the Nivkhi), the designs on the back of the jacket are supposed to protect a woman from what is not visible to her. A similar belief was that a woman working at the fire with her back to the door needed protection at the back. An Udege informant claimed that since a woman never faced her guests directly in traditional society, she compensated by displaying an ornately decorated back.³⁹

Metal objects that made a sound were attached to the hem of the jacket. In other Siberian cultures, such metal objects increased the value of the coat and thereby the prestige of the wearer.⁴⁰ The Nivkhi and Orochi considered them to be protective amulets. These metal coins bore a mask like the one in the motif panels on fish skin jackets.

Motifs meant to empower and protect the wearer against malevolent spirits, were embroidered at the openings of the garment - at the collar, hem, front opening, and wrists. These openings made the wearer susceptible to evil spirits; the motifs served to ward the evil away.⁴¹

Hunting garments and equipment were beautifully made and crafted. The aesthetic appeal of both was intended to appease and honour the spirits of the hunted prey whose capitulation was thereby rendered easier.

VII. Amur clothing: change and continuity

Amur clothing in the Soviet period

In the hundred years since the Russians set up settlements in the region, the clothing of the Amur people has undergone radical transformations. Dog, sable and lynx pelts, fish skin jackets and boots made of mammal skins gradually fell into disuse. 'Traditional' clothes are brought out for festive occasions. In the early years of the Soviet period, traditional clothing was more widely prevalent than Russian clothing. By the Second World War, Russian clothing predominated. However, post-war shortages of ready-made Russian clothing, caused the Nivkhi to resort to their own clothing made of dog- and fish skin.⁴²

By the nineteen sixties, the Nivkhi were wearing rubber boots, trousers, quilted jackets and caps while at work. In the summer, while not at work, men wore jackets. On the hotter days, they wore thin shirts. Their winter clothing is made of fur, but it is mainly purchased ready-made in a store.⁴³

More women than men have retained the traditional styles of dressing, but few display the tendency to ornament the collar, flap, cuffs, hem and spine of the garment as was done earlier.



A blouse and a belt, worn by a member of a Nivkhi folklore group while performing traditional songs and dances (RMV 5758-4a,b)

Metal coins or discs previously used along the hemline of the robe, are now removed from older garments and used in newer ones. They are passed on from mother to daughter and highly valued.⁴⁴

In general, traditional footwear continues to be widely prevalent. Fishermen/women of the Lower Amur River continue to favour salmon and pike skin boots. Such boots are strong, yet light. They are waterproof and provide good traction on ice.⁴⁵ Interestingly, those communities (including the Russians) that engage in fishing and mingle with the Nivkhi on the Lower Amur and Sakhalin wear Nivkhi shoes and mittens. Thus Nivkhi traditions emerge not only in Nivkhi contemporary society, but also the material cultures of nearby peoples.⁴⁶



Mitten (RMV 5117-5a)

The Soviet state referred to regional arts and crafts as '*narodnoe iskusstvo*' or folk arts. Its attitude towards minority populations was paternalistic. In Soviet nationalist rhetoric, it was the Soviets who led the non-Russian people within the nation's borders into a modern era and improved their standard of living. Traditional culture was to be respected but mention was always to be made of the non-Russians' stride towards progress under the Soviet state. Soviet nationalities policy was inherently paradoxical, trying to do a balancing act between the streamlining of a national, pan-Soviet identity, and the freedom of diversity.



Members of indigenous peoples during traditional games, such as wrestling and archery (Amur region, c. 1975). During the Soviet regime such games were allowed as folkloric events.

Ethnographers wrote of the need to teach traditional skills to younger generations and lamented the neglect of local arts and crafts.⁴⁷



Russian and Nivkh schoolchildren learn from Russian books about the Nivkh culture. (Amur region, c.1975).

Workshops were set up in several towns in Siberia encouraging students to learn the traditional crafts of their respective regions.⁴⁸ Museums and exhibition halls across the country gave regional arts of the Amur national exposure. How regional arts of non-Russian groups in the Soviet Union were presented to a national public and what story they were supposed to tell that public, is a subject that begs research.

The post-Soviet period: a quest for their submerged traditions

In 1990, upon coming across ethnographer Bruce Grant who wished to research their culture, the Nivkhi replied that he was too late. Their culture had disappeared; it had been destroyed by the Soviets, they said.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, traces of their pre-Soviet material culture did survive in the Soviet period.

Since perestroika, there has been a quest for traditions long ago submerged or marginalized in the process of Sovietization. When Bruce Grant visited a Nivkhi village in 1991, few people could narrate older Nivkhi legends or explain the traditional world-view of the Amur people. Traditional culture meant a disparate set of elements: drying of salmon for *yukola* (dried fish), fish skin custard (*muvi*), the possession of a dog sled, and occasional offerings to the gods of the sea and the Taiga. Other works point to the prevalence of pre-Soviet cultural elements. Kira van Deusen, for instance, was able to record prevailing ideas on

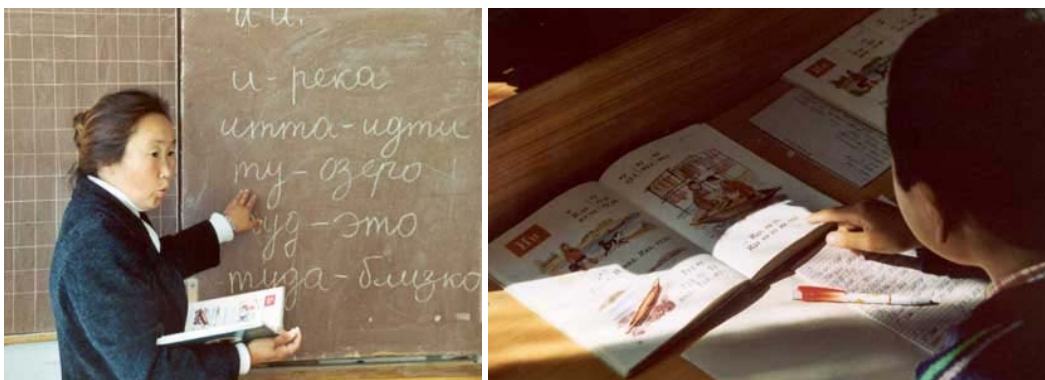
traditional clothing in 1992-1993. She was struck by the continuity in worldview and beliefs associated with the making of clothing, the sewing styles and the choice of motifs.



Children's slippers, made of imitation leather, with imitation fur borders and lining. The materials of which the slippers were made, are modern and fairly new to the material culture of the Amur region. But the form and decoration of the slippers are traditional, dating back to the nineteenth century and possibly even before (RMV 5517-4a,b)

Yet she also noted the changes in materials used and the replacement of appliqué by embroidery. Her informants were Nanai, Nivkhi and Udege women, skilled in sewing and conversant with the local legends related to clothing.

The story of the Amur people in the 1990s is one of a quest for traditional (in other words, pre-Soviet) forms of cultural expression. Language as a tool in the assertion of identity is being effectively mobilized in the region. Nivkhi schools now teach Nivkhi to both Russian and Nivkhi students.



A school in Chir Unvd where Nivkhi is taught to both Nivkhi and Russian students, in a time of renewed attempts to reassert Nivkhi identity. (Photos courtesy Cecilia Odé, 2001)

Looking to revive older traditions, the people of the Amur now hold bear festivals, and have resurrected many decorative and applied arts.⁵⁰ Reasserting their identity both in Russia and abroad with a cultural statement, many Amur people use traditional embroidery patterns on their Russian-style blouses, vests and dresses.



Young Nivkh girls and older Nivkh women dressed in traditional clothing made of synthetic textiles but adorned with typical Amur embroidery. (Photos courtesy Cecilia Odé, 2001)

Russian cultural elements have been absorbed, but pre-Soviet, local elements have also been retained. Material culture in this region acquires new forms in the 1990s, as it attempts to reconcile and reflect the many pasts of the people of the Amur.



Nanai woman wearing a modern home made silk robe designed according to the traditional female clothing. The decorations are made of traditional embroidery and modern Russian beads and buttons (Photo: courtesy *Vereniging Nederland - USSR*, c. 1975)

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Notes

- ¹ Cunera Buijs, *De Nivkh en Oroch, twee Siberische volken in verandering* (een museumstagverslag, 1984).
- ² **taiga**: northern coniferous-forest belt of Eurasia, bordered on the north by the treeless tundra and on the south by the steppe. This vast belt, comprising about one third of the forest land of the world, extends south from the tundra to about lat. 62°N in Norway, Sweden, and Finland, but dips still farther south to about lat. 53°N in the Urals. It extends through northern European Russia across the Ural Mountains and over most of Siberia. It has a continental climate, with long, severe winters of 6 or 7 months. Thawing occurs during late April or early May, and the growing season is short. The mean average summer temperatures are fairly high, but there are night frosts. Podzols are the soils of this zone. Only the hardier cereals and roots, such as barley, oats, and potatoes, can be cultivated. The principal species of trees are cedar, pine, spruce, larch, birch, and aspen. The taiga has many swampy areas formed during the spring. (Source: www.encyclopedia.com)
- ³ Jill Oakes and Rick Riewe, *Spirit of Siberia. Traditional Native Life, Clothing, and Footwear* (Bata Shoe Museum, 1998), 165.
- ⁴ John. J. Stephan, *The Russian Far East. A History* (California, 1994), 12-13.
- ⁵ For a discussion of the gradual colonization of the Siberian frontier areas and changing Russian perspectives on the people of the North, see Yuri Slezkine, *Arctic Mirrors. Russia and the Small Peoples of the North*, (Ithaca and London, 1994).
- ⁶ Stalin, Joseph Vissarionovich Dzhugashvili.
b. Gori (Georgia), December 9(21) 1879 - d. Moscow, March 6 1953, Soviet Communist leader and head of the USSR from the death of V. I. Lenin (1924) until his own death. His real name was Dzhugashvili (also spelled Dzugashvili or Djugashvili); he adopted the name Stalin ("man of steel) about 1913. (Source: www.encyclopedia.com)
- ⁷ Cunera Buijs, "The Nivkh and the Oroch. two changing Siberian peoples," in *Life and Survival in the Arctic. Cultural Changes in the Polar Regions*, ed. G.W. Nooter (The Hague, 1984).
- ⁸ Lydia Black, "Peoples of the Amur and Maritime Regions," in *Crossroads of Continents. Cultures of Siberia and Alaska*, eds. William W. Fitzhugh and Aron Crowell (Washington, 1988) 64.
- ⁹ Cunera Buijs, "The Nivkh and the Oroch. two changing Siberian peoples," 64.
- ¹⁰ Lydia Black, "Peoples of the Amur and Maritime regions," 31.
- ¹¹ Gorbachev, Mikhail Sergeyevich.
Stavropol Region 1931. Soviet Union political leader 1985-1991.
- ¹² Perestroika: Soviet economic and social policy of the late 1980s. *Perestroika* [restructuring] was the term attached to the attempts (1985-91) by Mikhail Gorbachev to transform the stagnant, inefficient command economy of the Soviet Union into a decentralized market-oriented economy. Industrial managers and local government and party officials were granted greater autonomy, and open elections were introduced in an attempt to democratize the Communist party organization. By 1991, *perestroika* was on the wane, and after the failed August Coup of 1991 was eclipsed by the dramatic changes in the constitution of the union. (Source: www.encyclopedia.com)
- ¹³ Glasnost: Soviet cultural and social policy of the late 1980s. Following his ascension to the leadership of the USSR in 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev began to promote a policy of openness in public discussions about current and historical problems. The policy was termed *glasnost* [openness]. Gorbachev hoped that candidness about the state of the country would accelerate his perestroika program. (Source: www.encyclopedia.com)
- ¹⁴ Oakes and Riewe, *Spirit of Siberia*, 170.
- ¹⁵ Lydia Black, "The Nivkh (Gilyak) of Sakhalin and the Lower Amur," *Arctic Anthropology*, 10:1 (1973): 29.
- ¹⁶ John J. Stephan, 14.
- ¹⁷ Cunera Buijs, *Poolkleding: een tweede huid* (Leiden: 1993), 70.
- ¹⁸ Oakes and Riewe, 170.
- ¹⁹ *ibid.*
- ²⁰ James W. VanStone, "An Ethnographic Collection from Northern Sakhalin Island," *Fieldiana* 8 (1985): 5-6.
- ²¹ James W. VanStone, "An Ethnographic Collection from Northern Sakhalin Island," *Fieldiana* 8 (1985): 5-6.

- ²² Lydia Black, "The Nivkh," 35.
- ²³ Valérie Chaussonet, "Needles and Animals: Women's Magic," in *Crossroads of Continents*, 212.
- ²⁴ Oakes and Riewe, *Spirit of Siberia*, 15.
- ²⁵ Jill Oakes and Rick Riewe, *Spirit of Siberia. Traditional Native Life, Clothing, and Footwear* (Bata Shoe Museum, 1998), 165.
- ²⁶ Jill Oakes and Rick Riewe, *Spirit of Siberia. Traditional Native Life, Clothing, and Footwear* (Bata Shoe Museum, 1998), 165.
- ²⁷ Oakes and Riewe, *Spirit of Siberia*, 165.
- ²⁸ B. Laufer, "The Decorative Arts of the Amur Tribes. The Jezup North Pacific Expedition," IV (Memoirs of the American Museum of Natural History, 1902).
- ²⁹ The Sikhote-Alin mountains are in the larger, eastern part of the region Primorye, southeast of the river Amur, stretching for about 2,000 kilometres from north to south. The region is famed for its nature and wildlife (which recently prompted Unesco to add Sikhote Alin to the World Heritage List), but also boasts the presence of neolithic petroglyphs (images carved into rock).
- ³⁰ A. Okladnikov, *Art of the Amur. Ancient Art of the Russian Far East* (New York and Leningrad, 1981).
- ³¹ A. Okladnikov, *Art of the Amur*, 18-19;
- ³² Kira van Deusen, "Protection and Empowerment: Clothing Symbolism in the Amur River Region of the Russian Far East," in *Braving the cold. Continuity and Change in Arctic Clothing*, eds. Cunera Buijs and Jarich Oosten (Leiden, 1997), 156.
- ³³ Kira van Deusen, 155.
- ³⁴ A. Okladnikov, 16.
- ³⁵ Cunera Buijs, personal communication, 20 April 2001.
- ³⁶ Kira van Deusen, 149.
- ³⁷ Oakes and Riewe, *Spirit of Siberia*, 165.
- ³⁸ Cunera Buijs, *Poolkleding*, 70.
- ³⁹ Kira van Deusen, 154.
- ⁴⁰ Valérie Chaussonet and Bernadette Driscoll, "The Bleeding Coat: The Art of North Pacific Ritual Clothing," in *Anthropology of the North Pacific Rim*, eds. William W. Fitzhugh and Valérie Chaussonet (Washington, 1994), 8.
- ⁴¹ *ibid.*, 112
- ⁴² C. M. Taksami, "Odezhda Nivkhov," in *Odezhda Narodov Sibiri* (Leningrad, 1970), 167-173, 195.
- ⁴³ *ibid.*
- ⁴⁴ *ibid.*
- ⁴⁵ A.V. Smolyak, "Clothing, Crafts and Applied Arts of Soviet Native People," *Inuktitut*, 68 (1988): 78.
- ⁴⁶ *ibid.*
- ⁴⁷ C. Taksami, 195
- ⁴⁸ A.V. Smolyak, 86-91.
- ⁴⁹ Bruce Grant, *In the Soviet House of Culture. A Century of Perestroikas* (Princeton, 1995), 13.
- ⁵⁰ Oakes and Riewe, *Spirit of Siberia*, 169.