

Kutchka's Children

The Koryak People of Kamchatka

The Koryak people are a tribal group living in Kamchatka, a large volcanic peninsula, jutting out in roughly a southerly direction, from north eastern Siberia, ending in the North Pacific Ocean.

The north of Kamchatka is roughly on the same latitude as Norway, and the southern-most tip of the peninsula is roughly at the same latitude as South Wales in the UK. Despite being quite a long way south of the Arctic circle however, Kamchatka does not benefit from the warming waters of the Gulf Stream, and so it is far colder than both the UK and Norway, being mostly covered in tundra, under which lies a deep layer of perma-frost.

THE WEST MEETS THE EAST

The Koryak people first came into contact with Europeans (Russians) in the late C17th, during the time of the Russian invasion and colonisation of Siberia, and they can be thought of as being made up of two groups, the coastal people (*nemelan* or *nymylan*: 'village dwellers') and the inland nomadic reindeer herders (*chauchen* or *chauchven*: 'rich in reindeer').

Like the rest of the indigenous Siberian people, the Koryaks historically are animists, with a deep shamanic culture. Generally they did not have professional shamans, rather each family had its own shaman (*eiieiialan*) and each family owned its own drum and other ritual objects.

As a culture they had close connections to their neighbours to the north, the Chukchi, who live around the Bering Straits that separate Siberia from North America - and to the West the Evenk people of the Siberian mainland.

In the C18th and C19th, after discovery by Russians, the peninsula gained an international reputation for the rich quantity of available furs, fish and meat, with an influx of Russians, Japanese, Americans, Koreans, Norwegians,

and other nationalities starting to live and trade there.

Because of its location, it was not too hard to reach by many nations around the Pacific: one American fur trader operating out of Seattle made regular visits and had a permanent post there; Japanese fishermen, after salmon and caviar, built canning factories up and down the coast; American whalers and other traders regularly participated in annual native fairs, trading Winchester rifles and other things for furs, meat, and marine ivory.

But in the C20th this all changed; the Soviet Union drew the iron curtain around its borders and Kamchatka became closed to all, including Soviet citizens. A nuclear submarine base was established, and the central part of the peninsula became the target area for missile tests.

Since the fall of the Soviet Union however, Kamchatka has opened up. It is now a popular destination for those interested in wildlife and hunting and adventure holidays.

Like tribal people everywhere the Koryak contact with European culture has been a mixed blessing at the very best. Alcohol abuse is a major problem and the Koryak are often treated as second class citizens. One Koryak joke sums up their plight.

'A Koryak man was sitting out in the tundra guarding the reindeer herd when he heard a voice far away calling, 'People! People!'

So he stood up and ran toward the sound, over the tundra, over the hills, until finally he saw a Russian man stuck in deep snow. The Russian called out 'People! People! Help me! Help me!'

The Koryak looked at the Russian and said, 'Oh? So in the tundra we are people but in the town we are just Koryaks.'

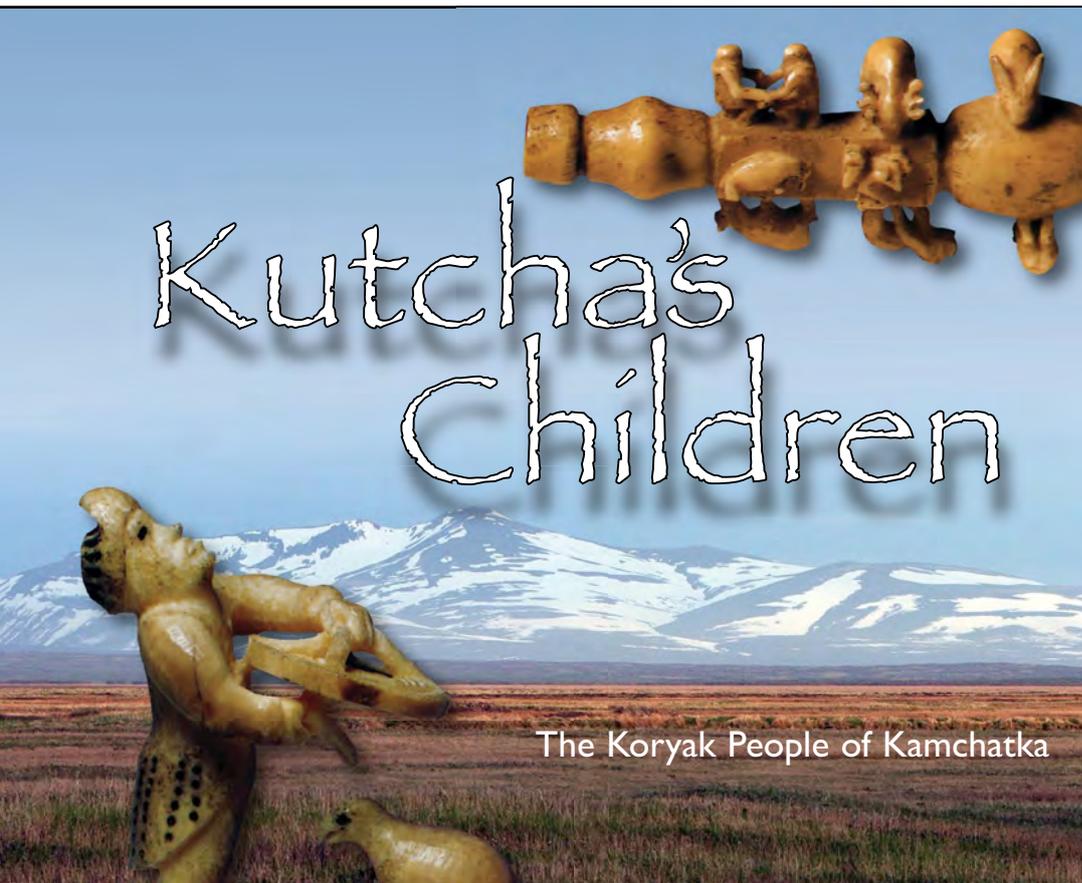
THE LIVING LANDSCAPE

The wild beauty of the Kamchatkan landscape is an important aspect in Koryak shamanism. The landscape of the tundra - especially certain features regarded as special power places -

Marine ivory
Koryak carvings

Above: smoking
pipe. Early C20th

Inset: two shamans
with their spirit
helpers.
Early
C20th



is seen as being alive and sentient.

The anthropologist Dr Alexander King, writing about his travels in Kamchatka, describes the reaction of his Koryak travel guide - a reindeer brigade leader (herder) - when they came across a sacred rock while out in the tundra.

'When we returned to camp, he mentioned to the rest that we had spied the sacred rock. The brigade leader asked me if I had 'prayed.' I told him, "No, it was a little far off." He scolded me, "It doesn't matter if you are far away, you must always pray." Sacred sites demand to be honoured even if they are only barely within sight.'

Sacred rocks are seen as being more like people than places because they have a will and personality. The Koryak say that the will of a sacred rock is often demonstrated by it.

One story concerns a hill with a flat top. The Soviets tried several times to erect a radio relay tower on it, but the tower always fell down after a short time. Russians trying to photograph or video the hill also failed in their attempts, the native people said the failure of technology to record or build on the hill was a result of the hill's will.

Another story recounts the Soviet authorities' desire to move a sacred rock from its original location. They wanted to erect a monument to local war heroes, and the local party chief organised a team of workmen to drag the rock into the centre of town with a large tractor. There it was set upon a concrete platform and a plaque was fixed on to it.

According to the story, the party boss and all the workmen associated with the sacred rock's desecration and removal to town died or suffered some other tragedy soon afterwards. Russian townspeople lay wreaths, and flowers at the rock on special days remembering the war, but Koryak often leave their normal offerings of tobacco or perhaps chewing gum, or maybe a coin.

Many Russians think that is the Koryak way of honouring war dead, but they are actually honouring the rock itself.

Another story tells of a similar sacred rock, which Russian geologists wanted to drag off to study back in the town. When they returned with a tractor to move the rock, it had moved and hidden

itself away from the Russians.

Sacred rocks and hills are deeply integral with traditional Koryak life, and are kept sacred because of the regular giving of small ritual offerings to them.

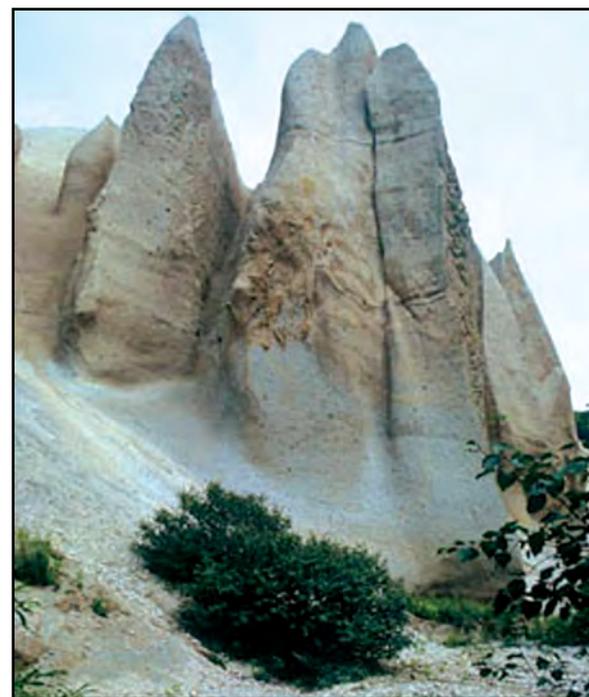
Jon Turk, in his book 'The Ravens Gift' - which we feature in this issue of Hoop - describes how the Koryaks he is with interact with their local sacred rock.

'When you visit the Holy Stone, you must not take any pictures. The last person who took pictures of the Holy Stone, he fell in the river and drowned three days later.'

When you pass the Holy Stone you must to left a special thing. Not a big thing, maybe just a small thing of big love. One time, when I was a little girl, I passed the Holy Stone. I had some special sweet, but I did not want to put it to the stone. I was riding a horse. An hour after we were crossing a river, the horse jumped into the air. Just jump, no why. I fell and broke my leg. This way you must all times put a gift on the Holy Stone.'

While talking to the mayor of a local town it's explained to Jon that their local sacred rock is dying.

'Energy flows from the magma-filled bowels of the earth to the Holy Stone and also feeds it to the stone... People give energy to the stone, but they also take energy. If I concentrate a little power from the landscape, modulate it through my body, and deliver it to the stone, then a friend, a stranger, or even an enemy can assimilate some of that goodwill, amplified by the receipt of additional energy from the deep earth.'



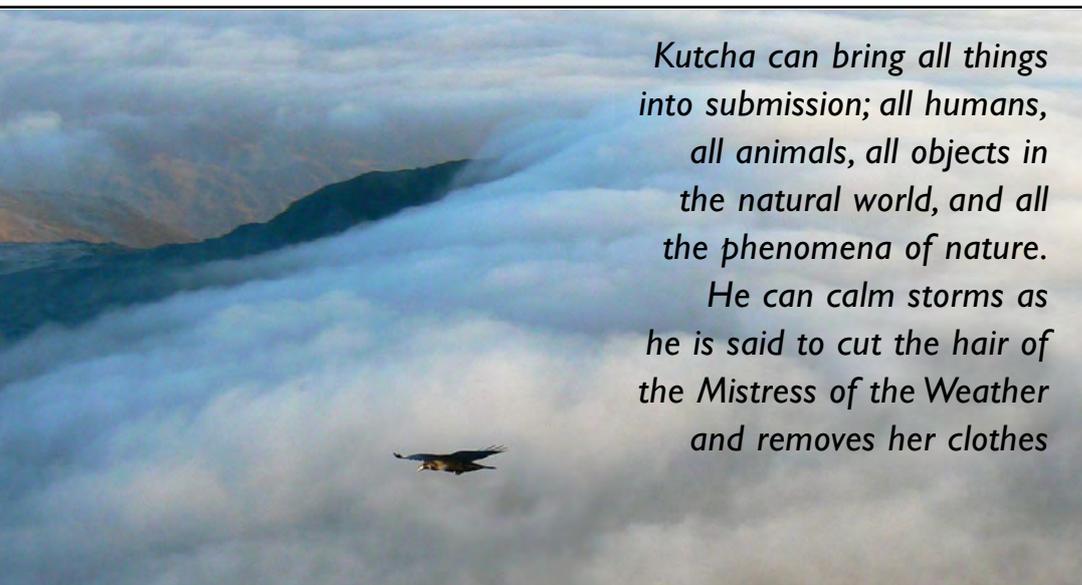
Human beings have learned to rely so much on their technological power that they no longer feel the need to seek energy from the earth. As a result, we take from the Holy Stone without counting what we take and without giving back. Without reciprocity the Holy Stone will eventually lose its power.'

These powerfully charged sacred sites punctuate the Koryak cultural map, and the native people interact with them by making prayers (thoughts or words of respect, as well as positive wishes for the future) and leave offerings of cloth, money, tobacco, fat and even bullets. Reindeer herders, who move through a sacred

Above: the sacred Kutkhiny Baty (Kutcha's Boats) rocks. Ancient legends recount that Kutcha the raven lived on the lake where these rocks are found, and when he left, he turned his boats upside down to keep them safe and they turned to stone

Below: Koryak shaman and villagers. Early C20th





Kutcha can bring all things into submission; all humans, all animals, all objects in the natural world, and all the phenomena of nature. He can calm storms as he is said to cut the hair of the Mistress of the Weather and removes her clothes

space-time on their journeys with the reindeer, especially connect to sacred stones in order to bring biological and spiritual health to both the people and deer.

Aspects of the Koryak landscape have genders as well as personalities. Sacred rock formations as well as other sites, such as ritual posts erected along the seashore to encourage 'fish-bringing winds', are referred to by the Koryak word *apapel*, which is a word for grandfather.

A word for grandmother, *anyapel*, is used for sacred rock amulets (small or medium-sized rocks sewn into special reindeer-skin bags and often decorated with beadwork) which are kept inside the house or tent.

Traditionally the tent owners most powerful *anyapel* was kept inside the interior sleeping area.

This is considered a feminine space, and is where a nuclear family sleep together. When one side of the skin tent is raised up during the day, it is the place where people (especially men) like to eat meals. The tent then is seen as a feminine area, balanced by the masculine area of the outside tundra.

KUTCHA THE RAVEN

The most important spirit of the Koryak is the - often trickster - spirit Kutcha or Kujkynnjaku the Raven, often helped by members of his family: his wife Miti, his sons and daughters, nephews and nieces.

Kutcha is generally invested with the characteristics of an ancestor or patriarch. He is sometimes called the Old Man or Grandfather, and sometimes Creator. In the Koryak world view Kutcha is a helper spirit, an ancestor and also a creator all rolled up in one; although the Koryak also have a master spirit who lives in the sky, sometimes identified with the sun or the moon, and sometimes with the dawn, or with the universe.

The children of this master spirit are the People of the Clouds, and family life and romance are in their care - lovers often ask for help from the People of the Clouds.

But Koryak stories say that a long time ago the Master of Masters sent Kutcha the raven to earth to establish and maintain order, which is why in shamanism his role can also be as a messenger between the shamans and the master spirits.

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In stories Kutcha often marries his children to the Mistress of the Weather, or to the North and South Winds, or the People of the Clouds. In this way he plays the role of a

cosmic organiser of the spirits.

Kutcha is also the protector of the tribe and the family group. He knows where to find food for his own family, and human families will call upon his services to help them find food for theirs. In many myths Kutcha - thanks to his trickster cunning - achieves a successful hunt, or a good catch of fish, and so hunters often call upon his help.

It is also Kutcha who is called upon in caring for the sick, especially those who are threatened by harmful spirits.

THE SPIRIT HOSTS

The Koryak see the world as being inhabited by a great host of spirits, some harmful and others benevolent. Amongst the reindeer-breeders the spirits are known as *ninvits*, and among the village Koryaks as *kalas* or *kblbs*.

The spirits are said to be able to make their bodies grow large or small at will, and they can shape-shift into other beings such as humans or animals.

These spirits are in some way similar to the fairies of European culture, and are said to have lives very similar to those of humans. There are village living spirits who are hunters of marine animals and fish (only using bears instead of dogs) and nomadic herder spirits who herd wild sheep instead of reindeer.

They are said to be mortal, and some are said to live in a subterranean world, visiting human homes at night - a time which in their subterranean world is day, making the spirits feel more courageous. Other spirits are said to live on the earth, much as people do, but in a sort of parallel mythical world to this one, in the land where the sun sets - which is a little like the end of a rainbow, always out of reach.

Harmful spirits attack humans for several reasons, the most basic being that they eat humans and require them as food. Sometimes they are believed to have been sent by the master spirit, and their role is to seek out people who have to be punished for refusing to make offerings at sacred places or who have violated cultural taboos.

The result of one of these spirit visitations is of course, sickness and possibly death. A Koryak says of a sick person that the spirits are eating them. The spirits eat the persons body, either

Below: Koryak *anyapel* grandmother sacred rock, protector of the family amulet. Stone, reindeer skin, wolverine fur, glass beads, pearls, cloth. Early C20th



when the Koryak reindeer herders return to their winter quarters, they traditionally wore wooden masks representing Kutcha, to frighten away any harmful spirits who had taken up residence during their absence

from the outside - in the case of illnesses such as scabies, ulcers, and sores - or from the inside in the case of illnesses that affect the organs.

Some spirits create illness simply with their poisoned breath, but other spirits use spirit weapons such as hammers, axes, or knives to create pain, swelling and death.

THE DEAD AND THE ANCESTORS

The human dead can, on occasion, become part of the harmful spirit host, and in this way present a great danger for the living, a little like a ghost or a vampire. This led to many precautions being taken by the Koryaks historically to protect themselves against any dead infected with harmful spirits, including giving knife-blows to a dead body to kill it a second time before burning it, and sometimes cutting the entire body into pieces.

As a protective measure, someone always watched over a body until the cremation ceremony, after having carefully tied the corpse's feet together and covered the face.

After the funeral rites, precautions were taken to prevent the dead person from finding his way back, and recognising his next of kin. For this reason the relatives of the deceased coated their faces with soot, put their clothes on inside-out, made their way home by a roundabout route, including numerous diversions, and finally passed over glowing embers.

These traditions have many parallels to the European custom of wearing black clothes at a funeral which, although now is a sign of respect, was historically done to prevent the souls of the dead recognising the living and causing them harm.

The part of the house where the body lay was guarded for ten days after the ceremony by a relative or by a simple wooden guard figure, an *ongon* spirit fetish set up to protect the space - also perhaps acting a little like a scarecrow for any passing harmful spirits.

But as much as the dead may be feared, the ancestors are

revered. Ancestors are an important aspect of traditional Koryak spirituality, not only the recent or primordial ancestor spirits of humans, but also the physical locations the ancestors are connected with.

Special sacred sites devoted to different ancestors are found across Kamchatka, where heaps of hunting weapons and tools, such as bone and stone arrowheads, as well as the horns of wild reindeer and wild sheep, and skulls of walruses and brown bears, have been found.

Each site was the symbolic location of the primordial founder of a family or a community, and each had its own spirit *ongon* in the form of a column of wood, sometimes with anthropomorphic designs carved at the top.

PROTECTION FROM THE SPIRITS

Traditionally the Koryaks are so aware of, and haunted by harmful spirits that they strive to protect themselves from them at all times.

In his book 'The Raven's Gift' Jon Turk encounters one woman, Lydia, who each time upon meeting him pulls a few threads from his clothes and burns them to incinerate any harmful spirits that are clinging to them (and so clinging to him).

In October, when the Koryak reindeer herders return to their winter quarters they traditionally wore ritual wooden masks representing Kutcha, either as a raven or as an old man. These masks are designed to frighten away any harmful spirits who have taken up residence during their absence.

Tattooing with special protective patterns was a permanent means of magical defense against attack, but a more temporary method was the sacrifice of dogs. Once killed, a dog was placed on a stake, its muzzle pointing upwards, and beside it arrows decorated with scraps of cloth were driven into the ground. The howls of the sacrificed dogs were said to awaken protective spirits, who would then use the arrows provided to kill any harmful spirits



Top: carved wooden Koryak ritual Kutcha mask. C1930

Above: reindeer herders on a sledge. Hand coloured photo, Early C20th

Right: Koryak dog sacrifice complete with ritual arrows planted next to the dogs. Early C20th



Above: contemporary drummers and dancers aim to keep Koryak culture alive

Below: modern, chainsaw carved, Kutcha the raven ongon with offering cloths in the background



THE USE OF THE FLY AGARIC

One aspect of Koryak - as well as other Siberian shamanism - is the use of the mushroom *Amanita muscaria*, commonly known as fly agaric.

There is a separate article in this issue of Sacred Hoop about the use of the mushroom in Kamchatka, so there is no need to go into this subject with much depth here, other than to share a brief Koryak story about the mushroom's origin.

Raven and Whale were friends. One day, so goes the tale, Whale swam too close to shore and became stuck in the mud. He called on Raven to lift him up and escort him back to deep water; but try as Raven tried, he was not strong enough. He told Whale to wait while he asked advice from the Great Sky Master Spirit.

The Sky Master told Raven to go to a certain place where he would find earth spirits called *wapaq*. If he ate some *wapaq* they would give him the strength to help his brother Whale.

The Sky Master spat upon the earth, and wherever his spittle fell, there sprang up little white spirit beings with big red hats shaped like umbrellas and spotted with white flecks.

Raven ate some and soon felt so exhilarated and powerful that he was able to lift Whale and return him to the open sea.

He told the *wapaq* spirits to grow forever on this earth. To his children, the Koryak people, Raven said that when anyone who was sick ate a *wapaq* it would tell him what ailed him, or explain the meaning of a dream, show him the Upperworld, or the world beneath the ground, or foretell the future.

KORYAK SHAMANISM TODAY

Like many tribal cultures across the world now, shamanism in Kamchatka went through a time of great upheaval during the C20th.

In Soviet times it was outlawed, the government intended to form a new, socialist Kamchatka, which in their own words, was to be made by combatting the *'state of ignorance of these people with their unhealthy beliefs, and the pernicious influence of their shamans.'*

Christian missionaries have picked up where the Soviets left off, labeling nearly all indigenous traditions as 'shamanism'.

The 'sects' (*sekty* in Russian)

prohibit their members from anything remotely looking like shamanism, including dancing, singing, or playing the traditional Koryak drum, which was a social instrument as well as a ritual shamanic object.

Many Koryak dislike the terms 'shaman' and 'shamanism,' or are uncomfortable talking about their traditions in those terms. Obviously some of this discomfort is connected to the Soviet repressions of shamans last century, which has left a stigma much like persecution of the witches has in the West.

In the C20th the Soviet system took children away from their families at a young age, putting them in state boarding schools, often hundreds of miles away from home, and dis-educated them about their culture - much like many Native Americans were dis-cultured at the mission schools.

This has led to a collapse of the cultural world view associated with shamanism, and in many cases left empty people robbed of their spirit, who try to find it again in a vodka bottle.

The old shamans are mostly gone now, especially those who were born before the Soviets system was forced on those living in Kamchatka, and as in many shamanic cultures the world over, the young shamans practicing nowadays say they are not powerful like the old shamans; the old shamans, now sadly gone, had the real power.

There is however in recent years a re-emergence of folk traditions, seen especially in troupes of professional or semi-professional dancers.

Although not shamanic in their own right, these are in some way helping to keep the culture alive, and some of the leaders of these troupes do their best to battle against the missionaries and imbue the youth with a sense of the sacred that provides them with moral grounding and a sense of self-respect. In subtle ways, they proselytise the indigenous spirituality, in a quiet religious battle, fought over the souls of the young people, between the old ways and the evangelising Christians.

Further reading: See the review of 'The Raven's Gift' by Jon Turk in this issue of Sacred Hoop. There are many Kutcha stories on the internet - just Google the words 'Kutcha raven' to find them.

who might be close by.

A simple charm often used for protection was to take a piece of meat from a sacrificed animal, while the animal's blood was spread around the area as protective prayers were said.

But the main protective method used, especially if sickness had resulted from a spirit attack, was to employ the skills of a shaman, who would, with Kutcha's help, drive away or destroy the harmful spirits and restore health and balance to a person, a family or a community.

Shamanism was not a professional occupation amongst the Koryak, unlike many other tribal groups in Siberia. Instead of a sick person going to a local expert, each family had a shaman and each person in the family was able - to some degree or another - to practice the tradition.

Saying that however, some shamans were renowned for their healing skill and would be sought out by others who were not members of the shaman's family.