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ETHNIC AND CULTURAL ASPECTS OF NANAI HEALING RITUAL SCULPTURES*

The present study discusses the ethnic and cultural aspects of ritual healing sculptures – sevhens, used by the Nanai people. The tradition of producing and using healing sculptures was common in shamanism. The practice encompasses certain archaic beliefs held by the Amur peoples which also resonate with various ecological, historical, and cultural themes. An analysis of the form and function of the sevhens points to their dual role as embodiments of disease and shaman's assistant. The study is based on literary and archival sources as well as the author's field materials generated by a survey carried out among the Gorin and Amur Nanai people.

Keywords: *Ritual sculpture, Nanai people, shamanism, soul, spirits, diseases, images of predators, tree species, transformation.*

Introduction

In Russian ethnographic and cultural studies, the ritual sculpture of the peoples inhabiting the Lower Amur region constitutes an individual object of research. In form and content it is closely connected with a particular stage in the development of religious belief and shamanic ritual practice, as well as with the historical and cultural influence of the Siberia-Pacific region. Sufficient data related to the area has been collected to reveal the evolution of imagery expressed in plastic form. A comparison of a number of artifacts from the Neolithic and ritual sculptures from later periods indicate an archaic layer in the semantics of sculptures and make it possible to trace a process of transformation in their ritual function.

Thus, stone figurines of bear, discovered at Neolithic sites in Siberia and the southern Far East region (Bratsk, Ilim, Suchu, Kondon) emphasize the role of bear as a totem, ancestor, and the main agent of rituals related to hunting. In the shamanist iconography of ethnographic cultures from the Amur valley, bears and feline predators act as markers of the sacred universe (Ivanov, 1937; Okladnikov, 1950; Tabarev, 1995, 1996; Maltseva, 2007).

Early studies carried out in the Lower Amur region provide information on the use of idols among local shamans, which were represented by stylized images of bears or tigers. Idols served as markers of the shamans' power and its type as well as receptacles of spirits (Schrenk, 1903; Sternberg, 1933). In his monograph on the Goldy (the Nanai), I.A. Lopatin paid considerable attention to their sophisticated worldview, reflected not only in the oral tradition, family, household, and religious rituals, but also in the semantics of ritual sculpture which reproduced the mythological worldview (1922). In studies by P.P. Shimkevich (1896) and S.M. Shirokogorov

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(1919, 1980) summing up the field data collected among the Nanai people and the Tungus, one finds a distinct classification of categories of shamanist spirits, personified in three-dimensional representations. Data on the peoples from the Urals to the Pacific, accumulated by the first half of the 20th century, helped D.K. Zelenin and S.V. Ivanov to draw cultural parallels between Siberia and the Far East using a comparative analysis of terminology, form and content in ritual imagery (Zelenin, 1936; Ivanov, 1937, 1954, 1970, 1979). It should be noted that in Russian ethnography, ritual statues from the Lower Amur region were designated using the terms *burkhan* or *ongon* employed in the Mongol and Turkic environment. Scholars from the Far East region introduced the notion of *sevhen*, used by the indigenous population into scholarly vocabulary (Kubanova, 1992; Kile, 1995; Bereznitsky, 2003). The tradition was actually founded by V.K. Arseniev who in his traveling notes uses the word *sevhon* to designate both shamanist spirits and their wooden representations (1989: 296, 350–53). During his field research in areas inhabited by the Tungus, S.M. Shirokogorov identified several variants of the term designating spirits: *seon* in the “Goldy” language, *sevhen* in the Tungus language, and *sevo* in the Ulchi language, which was fundamentally different from the Manchu *očko*. The similarity of terms brings the Nanai people close to the northern Tungus in terms of worldview and ritual (Shirokogoroff, 1926; Shirokogorov, 1980). N.A. Lipskaya made a significant contribution to the study of the ritual attributes of the Nanai people. The results of her travels in 1936–1937 in the form of reports (still unpublished) are kept in the archives of the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography, Russian Academy of Sciences in St. Petersburg (F. 5, Inv. 2, No. 60, 149 fols.). A.V. Smolyak, another researcher of the peoples living in the Lower Amur region, viewed ritual sculpture in the wider context of shamanism and interpreted it as a “receptacle” of the elemental spirits – the protectors of the shaman and markers of his power (1976, 1991).

Materials obtained during expeditions carried out in the area inhabited by the Nanai have embellished the ethnographic collections of many Russian academic and local history museums (Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography and Russian Ethnographic Museum in St. Petersburg, Khabarovsk Regional Museum of Local Studies, City Museum of Local History and Art Museum in Komsomolsk-on-Amur, Museum of History and Culture of the Peoples of Siberia and the Far East* in Novosibirsk). Collections of ritual objects, including sculptures, enable scholars to analyze the structure, semantics and components of the algorithm of animistic beliefs in considerable detail. This approach has been successfully applied in several studies (Bereznitsky, 2003;

Kubanova, 1992). The cultural approach, ethnogenetic context, and structural and semiotic analysis together expand the methodological foundation for studying early stages in the genesis of the forms and techniques of plastic arts. The same applies to studies of the traditional Nanai model of the world and its identification with pre-shamanist and shamanist cultural layers and combinations of influences on the part of other cultures (Ivanov, 1937, 1963; Ostrovsky, 2009; Sem, 2003a, b).

Although a database has been formed on the traditional Nanai worldview (records of observations and interviews, photographs, drawings, ritual objects), the medical, ecological, and social aspects of ritual sculpture remain insufficiently studied. One of the reasons for this is the longstanding ban that existed on scholarly discussion of religious issues in Russian ethnography. The stereotypical attitude of scholars to ritual objects as “relics of the past” was to a large degree the result of the anti-religious campaign of the People’s Commissariat for Education in 1920s–1930s. Objects related to shamanic ritual were also destroyed in 1954–1960s during the time of “Khrushchev’s Thaw” (Melnikova, 2006; Na grani mirov..., 2006; Slezin, 2009). Ideological and educational activities carried out among the indigenous population resulted in a demonstrative rejection of shamanic beliefs as being “anti-scientific in nature,” which sometimes manifested in the disposal of idols (Maltseva, 2009; Samar E.V., 2003). Persecutions resulted in *sevhen*s being hidden in attics and shamanic rituals being conducted in secluded areas. The results of research expeditions conducted in the Nanai and Khabarovsk Regions of the Khabarovsk Territory in 2011 also indicate that persecution led to the concealment of many other aspects of spiritual tradition.

The end of the 20th century witnessed a growing interest on behalf of the academic community in the subject of healing practices among the peoples of the Far East within the system of animistic and shamanist beliefs, and this is evident in the increased number of studies on the theme conducted by local researchers. These studies focus on the use of ritual objects in healing magic, on ethnic and cultural aspects of popular medicine, and on beliefs concerning disease in the context of the traditional worldview (Gaer, 1978; Podmaskin, 2003; Ostrovsky, 1990; Samar A.P., 1998).

Today, however, the scope of analysis of accumulated material on Nanai ritual sculpture can be expanded by including Russian and international studies. The conceptual framework of S.M. Shirokogorov on the role of “primary” (natural and external) and “secondary” (cultural) media in the development of an ethnic community, and E. Moran, who developed the “ecological approach” in medical anthropology may constitute a theoretical basis for the interpretation of the Nanai ritual sculpture as a social and cultural phenomenon. In this theoretical context, the ritual sculptures of the Nanai

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