

Images of Cannibals in the Folklore of the Forest Yukaghirs (Oduł)

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Abstract: This analysis of the mythical Old Man—a cannibal character in the tales of the Forest Yukaghirs (Oduł)—considers the significance of a particular genre of song in Oduł folklore. The article highlights discrepancies among the ethical norms that emerge in Oduł folklore representing problems faced in everyday life. These tales are interpreted in terms of human/non-human, insider/outsider, attraction/protection, and a number other dichotomies, as well as the form of recitation.

Keywords: cannibalism, folklore, Forest Yukaghirs, Iakutiia, Upper Kolyma

The Forest Yukaghirs (Oduł) of the Upper Kolyma River represent one of the most ancient indigenous hunting cultures of Northern Eurasia. The origins of the Oduł culture go back to the early history of Iakutiia. Archaeologists have established several possible datings. According to one account, ancestors of the Yukaghirs lived in the Mesolithic period, but according to others, it was the Bronze or Early Iron Age (Cherosov 1993). The third and most commonly accepted one is the Neolithic theory, in which the predecessors of the Yukaghirs emerged within the territory of Iakutiia in the fourth to second centuries BC, which makes them earlier inhabitants than other indigenous groups such as the Evenki, Even, or Iakut.

Conversely, historians consider that the entire territory of contemporary Iakutiia was inhabited by proto-Yukaghir tribes that occupied the banks of the rivers Lena, Aldan, Vilyui, Yana, Indigirka, Kolyma, and their tributaries (Gogolev 2007). These were nomadic groups of hunters of elk (moose) in the taiga and reindeer in the tundra, who wor-



shipped these animals as their spiritual ancestors and left depictions of them on rocks.

Now, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the Forest Yukaghirs still preserve some elements of the clan arrangement: hunting, clan community and clan territories, paganism as a form of religious consciousness and the high status of women in society. Traditional ways of hunting and fishing and the beliefs and superstitions associated with them are still well preserved and followed. Contemporary Yukaghir preserve their traditional arts, folklore, and the pagan vision of the world reflected in their legends and stories.

The Yukaghir culture has been influenced by other groups and traditions, and incorporates many innovations and borrowings, providing a good example of cultural divergence (Levin and Potapov 1956; Okladnikov 1975; Spiridonov 1996; Tugolukov 1979; Zhukova 2009, 2012).¹ For instance, it is believed that reindeer herding has been borrowed from the Tungus culture, whereas horse and cow breeding has been learned from the Yakuts. The Yukaghirs, who were occupied predominantly with hunting in the taiga, did not domesticate any animals that could be used as resources in their economy with probably only one exception—the domestication of the wolf, and later the dog, which had a great significance in Yukaghir economic, hunting, religious, and spiritual life (Chikachev 2004). Some folklore tales record attempts to domesticate hares and foxes (Jochelson 2005b; Okladnikov 1975: 236–237; Spiridonov 1996: 46; Zhukova et al. 1989: 1:50–54).

This article examines the presence of cannibal motifs and characters within the folklore of the forest-dwelling Yukaghir, or Odul. In academic literature cannibalism is defined as “a universal motif in myths and folklore that goes back to a practice that existed in Palaeolithic times and before ... moreover, consumption of human flesh (especially raw) is at the bottom of the mythological hierarchy of food regimes, drawing it closer to nature rather than culture ... Therefore the implications of cannibalism in a complex way are correlated with all the main categories and parameters of the world model in its pre-cultural aspect” (Meilakh 1980: 619–620).

The roots of the fear of cannibalism are part of human consciousness and correspond with the depth of history of human society. Scholars have distinguished exocannibalism (aimed at strangers), endocannibalism (aimed at relatives), as well as ritual cannibalism that included sacrifices to spirits and gods, and extreme cannibalism (during a war or famine). Cannibalism had been widely depicted in world folklore, literature, and religion.² This theme appears in the Mediterra-

nean and Middle East (Greek, Egyptian, Iranian) material and has also been described in the Kyrgyz epic *Manas*, Russian folktales, and Easter Eucharist (Meilakh 1980).

Folktales contain plentiful references to the images of other monsters and hunters of people. These include male creatures living in the Lower World (the mythical World of Shadows), with names like One-Eyed and Big Sharp Head, among others. Some of them have mythological significance and possible connections with the image of the ancestor (Jochelson 2005a: 222). The character called Big Sharp Head corresponds to the European Devil, or Satan; in etiological tales/myths about the primary and secondary arrangement of the world this character is opposed to Christ himself. Texts about Christ and his antithesis, Big Sharp Head, comprise a separate series of tales that were formulated after the Yukaghirs adopted Christianity at the end of the nineteenth century (Zhukova 2012: 41, 186, 203–205). The main focus of this article, however, is on a series of folklore tales about mythical cannibal Old Men and Old Women. The hunting and fishing economy of the Odul—which is rife with insecurity concerning food provisions and their perpetual search for food—has been reflected in their oral tradition.

The first stories about ancient cannibals were published at the end of the nineteenth and at the beginning of the twentieth century by Vladimir Jochelson. He was a pioneer of Yukaghir studies who had been exiled to the Iakutskii district. Jochelson participated in a number of scientific expeditions to the peoples of North-Eastern Asia including the Sibiriakov and Jessup expeditions (Jochelson 2005a, 2005b).

Our contemporaries have recorded some stories that fit within the same thematic series. We should mention that the Forest Yukaghirs themselves have contributed data and texts about cannibals to the study of their native culture. Among them are Nikolai Spiridonov, known by his pen name Teki Odulok (1996: 50–51) and Praskovia Prokopieva (2009). Prokopieva's book does not contain new texts, but one chapter is entirely devoted to the study of the image of the mythical Old Man. Several records have also been collected by a Tundra Yukaghir A. Laptev (Okladnikov 1975: 234–235) and Erukhim Kreinovich (1982: 284–292). A number of other records have been collected by the author of this article in single and joint authorship (Zhukova et al. 1989, 1: 77–93, 74–77, 153). Certain texts collected during the twentieth century represent variations of tales that were recorded by Vladimir Jochelson. The most illustrative in this sense is "How the Mythical Old Man Became Invisible" recorded in 1902 (Jochelson 2005a: 410–411). In 1930

this story was retold by Nikolai Spiridonov (1996: 50–51) and in 1987 the author of this article transcribed it from Vasili Shalugin (Zhukova et al. 1989, 1:74–77). These texts contain insignificant variations, for instance Vasili Shalugin refers to the mythical Old Man as “devil.” In recent years some of the earlier published stories about the mythical Old Men have been included in a book on Yukaghir Folklore (Kurilov 2005: 286–299, 378–383).

This folklore collection is comprised of about 20 tales concerning a mythical cannibal referred to as Old Man (Chuolid’i³ Polut) and his wife and children who roamed the taiga in search of food. The collection presents an example of Odul understandings about the nature of human beings, their place in the world, the struggle between good and evil powers, the existence of cannibals and the fight against them, and defines certain ethical categories. There is no clear opposition between male and female characters or contrasting social motifs in these tales. Instead, antagonistic relationships are characterized as the opposition between good and evil powers, between a human or his assistants and the cannibals. The cannibal himself, however, is neither a ghost, nor a devil or an otherworldly creature, but a human being.

Vladimir Jochelson wrote that the cannibal Chuolid’i Polut is a product of the Yukaghir demonology and the series of myths about this character all possess a specific nature. Chuolid’i Polut has

a material nature and feeds on human flesh in the same way we feed on animal flesh. Old men in these stories live by the sea or in the forest and their main occupation is to hunt people. They do not differ from people, as they wear clothes like normal human beings, but they are unusually large and can carry a killed moose by strapping it to their jackets. They do not have the intelligence of humans however, and people can often trick and kill them. Even dogs can be smarter than a cannibal; in two different stories a dog saves people from the ravenous Chuolid’i Polut.

In the stories these Old Men are married and have children. Nowadays, the Yukaghirs believe that these Old Men have become invisible to avoid people harming them and that they can suddenly attack people who get lost. It is possible that through the Yukaghir myths about cannibals we trace fragments of the past existence of a cannibal tribe that lived in the North and devoured prisoners or people from other tribes. It is worth mentioning that in the available stories, a cannibal who consumes a blood relative dies straight away, i.e. cannibalism among one’s own people is considered a sin. (Jochelson 2005b: v)

Later Jochelson wrote that mythical Old Men are hostile beings locked in a constant battle with human beings. He pointed to the fact that tales about mythical Old Men occupy a significant place in Yukaghir folklore and that these are the most genuine Yukaghir tales (Jochelson 2005a: 431).

The analysis undertaken of texts in this collection allows us to draw some conclusions and confirm some of Jochelson's statements. I suggest that the images of mythical cannibals in the Odul Folklore is not so much a product of Yukaghir demonology but of the implied existence of a separate tribe of northern cannibals devouring prisoners and humans from other tribes. I argue that it is a reflection of a genuine reality, often dramatic, that took place in the history of the Yukaghir people. It is an expression of the constant danger to humans living in the conditions of a hunting, gathering, and fishing subsistence economy, revealing that folklore and genuine reality can intersect in curious ways.

Vladimir Jochelson (2005a: 99–100) described two occasions of famine among the Yukaghirs at the end of the nineteenth century that ended in cannibalism: an event on the River Omolon in 1897 and another on the River Popovka in 1904. A description of the Omolon tragedy, "A case of cannibalism on the river Omolon," was also recorded by Vladimir Tan-Bogoraz (pen name N.A. Tan) who in 1897 happened to be in the region as part of the Sibiriakov expedition (Koriakin 2004; Tan 1898). A similar case of cannibalism was recounted to the author by Ekaterina Diachkova during a field expedition to Zyrianka, in the Verkhnekolymskii raion of Sakha (Iakutiia) in the 1990s. Diachkova, a native Yukaghir woman, was born in this Upper Kolyma River region and spent most of her youth there migrating with her parents from one hunting site to another. The instance of cannibalism, which described an event that allegedly took place in her native area of the Upper Kolyma, was narrated by her with condemnation and inner fear (Zhukova 2012: 354–355).

Although expressing disapproval, many Yukaghirs tried to hide such cases of cannibalism from the Russian administration and did not speak about such incidents (Tan 1898). For instance, when a local Yukaghir man discussed one particular tragedy with the scholar, the interviewee condemned the denunciator: "Why did he tell the Russians about it? The Russian court is a severe court" and added that when the snitch returns to the taiga "he will not live two days," implying that he will be killed in revenge (Tan 1898: 3). By hiding incidents of cannibalism, the clan members thus de facto justified all participants in the

tragedy in the face of the Russian administration, including cannibals who had saved their own lives by committing such crime.

In the Odul tales, unlike reality, we see a complete reverse: there is a prohibition on eating a relative. Such an ethical proscription might have resulted from a real need to have protection among the closest relatives. When analyzing the collected texts, Jochelson (2005b: v) wrote that “a mythical cannibal devouring his own blood relative dies straight away; that is, cannibalism among one’s own people is a sin.” Events occurring in reality at the end of the nineteenth and at the beginning of the twentieth century depicted different scenarios: those who served a prison sentence for the crime later managed to return to freedom and had new families. Folklore stories thus present the desired ethical norms and rules; the prohibition of cannibalism of relatives contained in the stories reflects one of the first norms of primitive law. This prohibition provided a person a relatively safe existence inside a tribal collective. In the stories the punishment for violation of such a prohibition was a cruel and effective measure: death for death, blood for blood. This was the first evidence of such an institution as blood revenge. Initially the prohibition itself had a magical component and blood itself was sufficient for revenge. For instance, a person who inadvertently tasted the flesh of a relative would die as a rule. It was this magic property of kin blood that was used by a Cunning Hare in one of the tales in order to get rid of his starving mother. The Hare gave his mother a snowball, a mixture of snow and his own blood from his nose. The Hare’s mother cooked porridge with it, ate it, then went to bed and never woke up again (Jochelson 2005b: 44–45). The ancient ritual of blood revenge, it seems, emerged inside a tribe or a kin group and with time it gradually became a way to regulate relationships between different tribes.

We are familiar with a story that narrates a ritual cannibalism that was not condemned by tradition (Jochelson 2005b: 85–90; Zhukova 2012: 45–51). In the folklore of the Tundra Yukaghirs there is evidence of existing inter-tribal cannibalism among Lamut (Even) people. A daughter of a strongman, Edilvei, married a Lamut man from the Upper Kolyma River. Her new brother-in-law accompanied the newlyweds to the tribal territory, but throughout the journey he cooked his meals separately. The curious new wife peeked into his bag, only to see female hands and breasts in it. Her husband confirmed her findings: “Yes, he is feeding on his wife whom he has killed.” When the new wife arrived in her husband’s territory she learned from an imprisoned Yukaghir woman that “their chief eats only fat females.” So the newly arrived bride was destined to become a new sacrifice, but she man-

aged to escape (Kurilov 2005: 149–151). Dr. Kurilov, a Yukaghir himself, commented on the text this way: “Cannibalism among the indigenous people in the North took place as a result of famine and severe starvation. In this story, however, we see the commonplace consumption of human flesh on a regular basis, which could have been practised by an extinct Even tribe” (2005: 469).

It needs to be pointed out that rare traces of cannibalism on the territory of central and western Iakutiia were discovered by archaeologists in a site and within a burial dating to the Neolithic period (Fedoseeva 1968: 25–37; Okladnikov 1955: 96). Some information about the consumption of defeated enemies, childless women, and feeding a guest with a deliberately well-fed child can be found in historical tales, legends, and stories of the Northern Yakut and Tungus people (Nikolaev 1961; Okladnikov 1955: 96–97, 339; Zhukova 2012: 293). This confirms that cannibalism among the people of Iakutiia goes back to ancient times and is connected to various causes, one of which is certainly hunger.

The Odul series of stories about mythical cannibal Old Men and Old Women is based on cannibalism caused by starvation. These characters are not mythical creatures and in the stories they are described as real people wearing clothes and with families. Ordinarily, in the stories it is old men and women, too frail to chase an animal and thus provide for themselves by hunting, who become cannibals. In only two texts are there cannibal men of a younger, more active age. The cannibals roamed the taiga and attacked the inhabitants of remote dwellings, predominantly female occupants. Alternatively, some lonely traveler might have stumbled across a cannibal’s house, thus becoming a victim.

An interesting moment in these tales is the announcement by a cannibal of his/her arrival or presence. This might be an element of the ancient Odul war ritual. The inclusion of songs in prosaic texts has a function of attracting the listener, making it similar to bait or a hunting decoy. It is known that in their hunting practice the Oduls imitated the voices of fowl and animals. It is logical then that the Yukaghir shamans use a song to call all their spirit helpers. Many stories actually open with a song. Below are few openings of the stories that illustrate this specific function of a song:

1. In the tale “Dovre” the main character heard somebody calling him from a tree with an invitation: “Dovre, Dovre, come here, come.” Being curious, Dovre climbed up the tree and fell into a trap. The Trap then called its owner who turned out to be Chuolid’i Polut himself. The cannibal followed with his song:

Lilu-lilu,
The grove is on the other side of the river,
I will dry some people in the shed
Lilu-lilu. (Zhukova et al. 1989, 1:85)

The cannibal put Dovre in his pocket and instructed his trap: "Catch more people!" The calling and attracting a victim in this story is directly related with hunting traps and decoys. Further on in the story, the Old Man was about to eat Dovre, but ended up dying along with all his children.

2. "Two brothers went up the river. When they walked, they heard the song of a mythical Old Man. The boys hid in a trap for animals, which they had made themselves. The cannibal found them and was about to eat them, but was killed by his own son, who made a deal with the two boys" (Jochelson 2005b: 59–60).

3. The Old Man went to the river and he saw people who lived on its opposite bank. "Singing he walked. Singing he addressed them: 'People, where do you cross the river?' ... 'People, help me cross the river.' But the people told him: 'There is a crossing place lower by the stream' ... And the people moved away" (Jochelson 2005b: 80). The song of the cannibal in this example functions as a warning sign for people.

Similar warnings can be found in tales and shamanic legends of a later period. In the mythological story about Peter Berbekin, similar to the story about Dovre, a singing trap is comparable to plants and women (Zhukova et al. 1989, 1:102–105). A hero during his ramblings in the Lower World saw dry grass (Yuk. *Ul'egeraa*, a grass tree), which was singing: "If somebody picks me up, / I will become alive, I will become younger!"

Out of curiosity Peter Berbekin took a dry grass, and immediately a huge worm wrapped itself around Peter's body that he had to carry for three years. The worm, *Ul'egery*, is depicted in a tale as a chthonic beast and a werewolf. The Plant Worm is limited in its movements and uses a song as a way to attract a victim in order to capture it. There are parallels to the character of *Ul'egery*, the Plant Worm in the Buriat tales. *Ul'gyr* in Buriat means tale and *ul'gyrshin* means a performer of a story that was sung and spoken. In Buriat tales we can find an indirect reference to the sound that is made through a pipe or a straw. It is similar to the musical kazoos used by the Yukaghirs which are made with a leaf of grass, or a chalumeau (*ulegeng chugursnube*) made from a reed or grass stem (Sheikin 1996: 79).

In the “Tale about an Old She-Fox” the Fox had a tendency to respond to people’s songs by singing and dancing herself. When she heard a song, she would send her daughters to check who the singer was. The hunters who put traps in front of the Fox’s den knew about her curious nature and lack of caution. So the Fox and her four daughters became the victims of the Fox’s curiosity. In this tale, the singing contest between the Fox and the hunters was won by those who initiated the singing. The hunters took a good trophy of all five foxes. This was a prize for a well-organized hunting, where the main bait was a song (Kurilov 1975: 235–236).

In a story about a hunter and his unfaithful wife, a falcon flies to the woman and sings praises about her beauty. The falcon invites the woman to his house where there were already 50 wives who carried out all the domestic work, and she did not need to do anything. The woman was holding off for a while, but eventually agreed and was later murdered by her husband for her infidelity (Jochelson 2005a: 365–367).

In a shaman’s legend “A Tree of a Grandpa Nicknamed Old” a young hunter heard beautiful singing as he traveled. On the top of a snow-covered hill he saw a young woman sitting and singing, dressed in ancient white clothing. This was a Girl-Devil. The young man shot from his rifle, the girl fell, but the hunter suffered as well, falling and losing all his strength. He nevertheless managed to get back home. At his request the shamans helped to fix the situation; they made a wooden doll—the container of the shadow spirit of the Girl-Devil (Zhukova et al. 1989, 2:10–13). The popularity of tales and legends incorporating songs of attraction that were often heard unexpectedly by a human and with unfavorable consequences serve as moralistic teachings and a warning to the listeners against thoughtless actions. For instance, the Forest Yukaghirs believe that one should not turn around if one is called by name in the taiga. People say that a man who thrice turned around on somebody’s call would die as a consequence (author’s fieldnotes).

As a rule, the performer of the bait-song and his supposed victim are characters of different sexes. If they are of the same sex, then the contrast in the tale is built on a different semantic meaning: a human versus non-human (a cannibal or a devil). Good illustrations to such contrasts are a tale about two sisters who were escaping from another cannibal sister (Jochelson 2005b: 231–236) and a tale about a Singing Girl and Singer Girl-Devil (Zhukova et al. 1989, 2:16–18).

Thus, the inclusion of a song in a text or the mention of the song plays an important role in a story and has a great significance in the plot. The functions of song inclusions in the narrative folklore of the

Yukaghirs are varied, from bait-songs that are sung as warnings, or as a challenge or attack to defense songs (much rarer, however). In these texts, the bait-songs can be sung by anybody: a grass stalk and a tree, a girl on a hill or invisible hunters. A theme of warning about incoming danger and approaching cannibals, as well as other creatures, is probably the most important in these songs.

Chuolid'i Polut was one of the most significant characters in the Odul folklore narratives. The image of a human-like creature roaming the taiga in search of food remained in narratives until the end of the twentieth century and clearly served as a reflection of food insecurity among the Yukaghirs who lived off hunting and lacked any permanent and reliable source of food. There are no contemporary folklore recordings to establish whether this character still features in the Odul narratives. All the tales about him are created within the same cultural mythological tradition and are thus similar in many ways and are comparable in their thematic and imagery context. These tales are connected by the same cultural space and the plot that is built around one evil character—the ancient Old Man. All of these aspects make the series of tales about cannibals a substantial, monolithic and a fascinating area of research.

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Notes

1. For more on general information about Forest Yukaghirs, see Zhukova (2014).

2. A note from Sibirica editors: There are a number of articles dealing with cannibalism and concepts of *windigo/wihtiko* in the North American scholarship (Carlson 2009; Colombo 1982; Ferrara and Lanoue 2004; Howard 1982; Podruchny 2004; Reid 1979; Ridington 1976; Schwarz and Morrisseau 1969; Turner 1977).

3. *Chuul'd'ii* or *chuoledi* means a myth or a tale; *Chuolid'i Polut* means mythical Old Man.

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