



# DRUMMER-BEAR

## Russian Toy in the Ceremonies and Cults of the Ob-Ugric People

Ethnographers have always been fascinated by miracles and wonders, curiosities and oddities; unusual things existing in other cultures continue to fuel their interest. When visiting the sanctuaries of Mansi and Khanty and describing the traditional attributes (sacrificial veils, bear-festival masks, wooden statues of gods, shamanic tambourines, etc.) made by the culture-bearers, researchers may come across a children's toy—a figure of a soldier, horse, or frog, or even an ordinary glass ball for the New Year tree. What do these jolly items do among the harsh, silent, and sometimes gloomy attributes of the ancient pagan religion?



A silver statuette of a goose, the core of the figurine of the Mansi's guardian spirit, and a porcelain salt-cellar shaped as a duck, a cult attribute of the Mansi



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T. I. Nomin, one of the most famous Mansi shamans, with his wife (1989). Photo by the author



The Khanty and Mansi are two small nations living in the north of West Siberia. Although the names of these nations are familiar to everyone—they gave the name to the Khanty–Mansi Autonomous Okrug (KhMAO), a vast territory renowned for its oil and gas fields—most people know little about these nations. Oil and gas seem to prevail over any discussion about the importance of the indigenous culture of the northern anglers and hunters.

Silver figurines of the Mansi and Khanty's guardian spirits

Ostyak types. From the book *Travel to Western Siberia* by Otto Finsch (Moscow, 1882)

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Остяцкія тыпы.

In my opinion, the essence of their culture is conveyed by the word “sponge.” Throughout the centuries, the culture of the Khanty and Mansi has been absorbing, like a sponge, the wide diversity of features of other ethnic cultures. A “model” Khanty or Mansi shrine would contain an ancient socketed bronze ax (“celt”), Sassanian silver dish, Bulgarian dipper, Russian soldier figure, Tatar boots, uniform of an officer or infantryman, German counter badge, etc. All these items coexist harmoniously within this religious and ritual practice of the north; they were bought, exchanged, and incorporated into the forbidden sacred sphere when one discovered that the shahs portrayed on Iranian and Central Asian vessels resembled the native gods of the Khanty and Mansi, and a copper figurine of Saint George looked like the youngest son of *Num-Torum*, the supreme god of the Ob-Ugrians.

In an Ugric shrine, researchers may often come across a children’s toy—a figure of a soldier, horse, or frog, or even an ordinary glass ball for the New Year tree.

The import of toys to the north is a long-standing tradition. At the end of the 17th century, a Dutch merchant described a strange incident that happened on his ship: he showed to Ostyaks a Nürnberg toy, a bear with a winding mechanism. When wound up, the bear began to drum, shake its head from side to side, and roll its eyes. Seeing this, Ostyaks immediately performed their usual rituals: began to dance in the bear’s honor, shake their heads, whistle, and hiss. They took the toy for a real *shaitan* (Ides and Brand, 1967).

Already in the 19th century, northern peoples began to buy simple children’s toys from Zyryan and Russian merchants. The famous Russian ethnographer I. Glushkov promised a Vogul named Bakhtiarov to bring him a tin figurine of a horse for praying.

The purchased toys were used mostly for ceremonies and rituals as symbols of deities and guardian spirits.

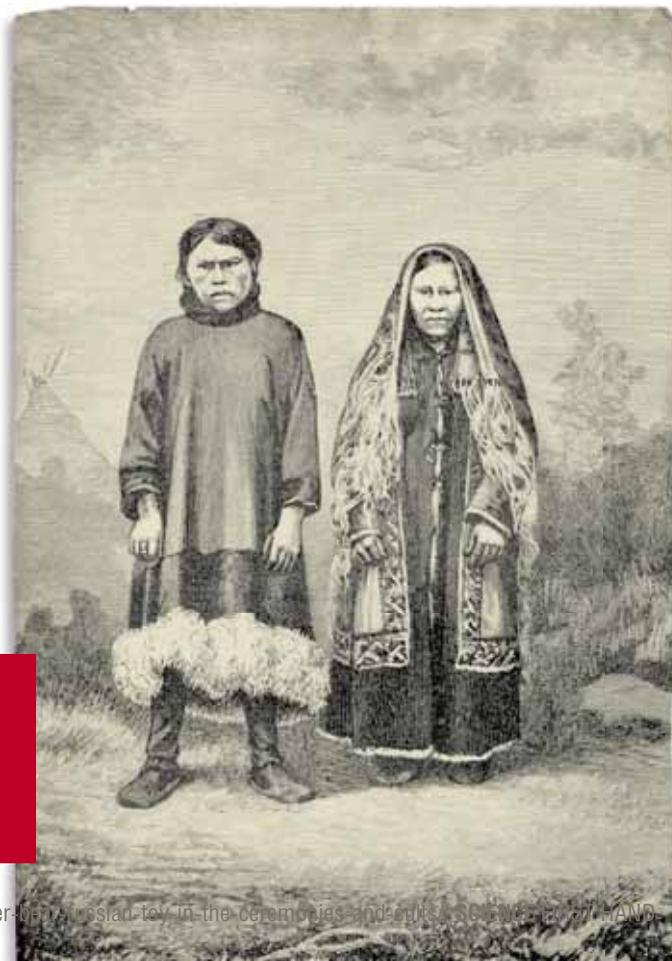
## How a Russian doll became a Khanty idol

At the end of the 19th century, the Tobolsk Museum got a copper children’s toy Harlequin, which showed a man wearing a Chinese cylindrical hat and bells of round shape on the arms and torso. According to legend, Ostyaks used the Harlequin as an idol. The Kunstkamera collections

### THEY CALL THEIR GODS “SHAITANS”

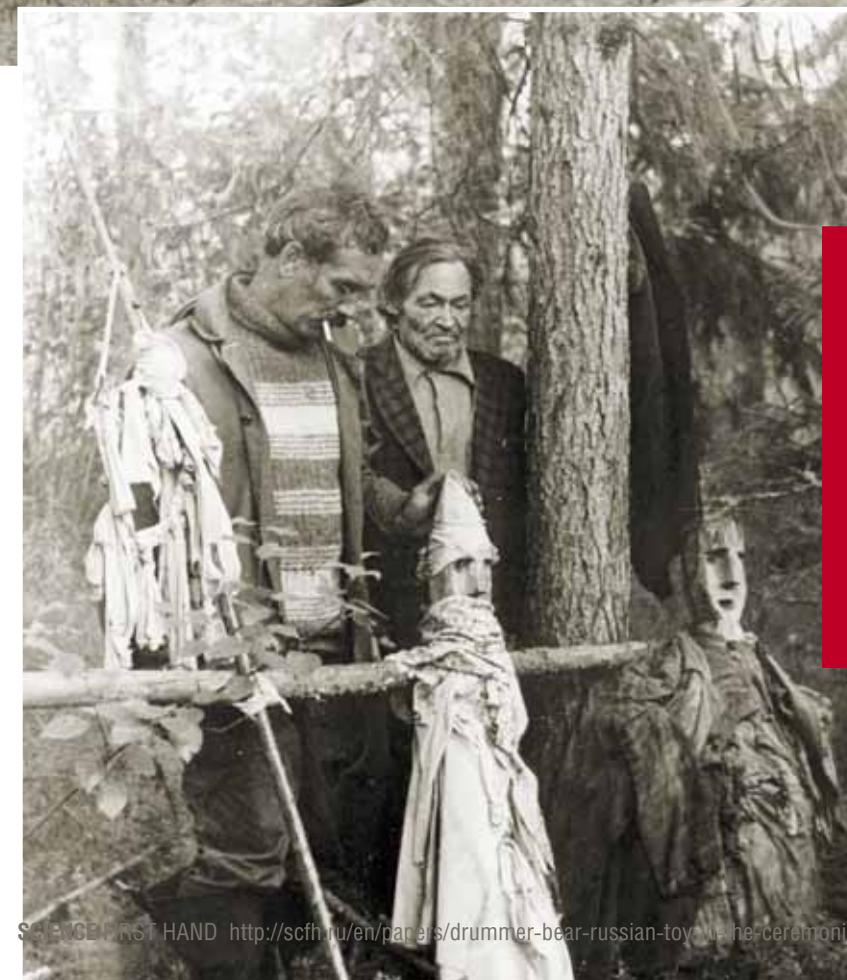
Up to this place [to Narym], the Ob River is inhabited by the Ostyaks. They worship earthly gods yet admit that according to the laws of nature, in the skies there must be the God who rules over everything. Nevertheless, they do not give any honors to him, but worship idols in the form of human figures made of wood and clay. Some of the wealthy Ostyaks dress them in silk garments, which look like skirts worn by Russian women. In every dwelling there is an arrangement of these idols, which are made of bast and stitched with threads made of reindeer guts. Next to them hangs a wisp of human and horse hair. A little further aside, there is a wooden vessel with milk porridge with which they feed their gods every day by putting the food into their mouths with a special spoon. However, since the idol cannot swallow the food, it runs down on both sides of its mouth, all along its body; a person who has seen this may forever stop eating porridge. And they worship their “precious” gods, or pray to them, by standing in front of the idols without bending their backs, just shaking their heads up and down. Moreover, they hiss and whistle through their teeth, like we do when we call up dogs.

*Notes about the Russian Embassy in China (1692–1695) by Evert Ides (also known as Adam Brand), Moscow, 1967, pp. 98–99*



The Kunovat Prince Artanzeev with his wife (from the drawing by M. Znamensky) [Stéphen Sommer, 1885, p. 211].

*A Summer in Siberia among the Ostyaks, Samoyeds, Zyryans, Tatars, Kirgiz, and Bashkirs by S. Sommer, Tomsk: Tomsk University, 2012, 640 pp.*



Mansi from the village of Turvat-Paul, 1990. Photo by the author

The ethnographer I. N. Gemuev and his guide P. F. Merov at a Mansi sanctuary, 1983. Photo by S. Tikhonov



*Mir-Sune-Hum.*  
Bottom: Harlequin,  
an Ostyak Idol



A shaman with a tambourine, 1989. Photo by the author  
An equestrian made of papier-mache



include an “ancient wooden Russian toy,” which was used to personify the family guardian spirit of the Ob-Ugric people. At the end of the 19th century, the Tavda Voguls had a guardian goddess described as follows: “A woman shaped as a nesting doll; a woman shaped as a Vogul doll; a woman with fiery hands; a woman with flaming hands; our old grandmother.”

We were able to describe a fair amount of toys kept in the home shrines of the Mansi and Khanty at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries. For instance, the Hozumovs, a Mansi family from the Berezovo district of the KhMAO–Yugra, had a family deity in the form of a large anthropomorphic

figure with a silver male figurine inside; the figurine was cast in Tobolsk in the early 19th century. A similar figurine played the role of a guardian spirit with Khanty families from the Polui River; this figurine was dressed in a miniature silver brocade robe.

Not long ago, in the village of Suevat Paul in the Sverdlovsk oblast, researchers found in the attic of an old Mansi house a porcelain figurine of a dancing girl wearing seven kerchiefs; the figurine symbolized *Kaltas’ekva*, the Mansi’s main female deity. The Lyapin Mansi kept in a sacred chest a glass Christmas toy shaped as a girl wearing a sundress; the purpose of this toy is, however, unknown.



A figure of the supreme deity in the shape of a bear.  
Right: Tribute (a horse)

There is evidence that the Selkups, the Khanty's neighbors, also used toys for ritual purposes. In 1954, the shaman N. A. Agichev created a sanctuary on Lake Vynga Pur, where he put under a lurch tree wooden sculptures of the spirits that tormented him. Later, he added to them children's dolls that he bought in a local shop, which also personified spirits. When he traveled to the nearby villages of Tarko-Sale or Kharampur, he took the "spirits" along with him in a boat.

### How the Heavenly god rode a hobbyhorse

Some of the sons of the supreme god *Num-Torum* in the mythology of the Ob-Ugric people are equestrians, first of all, his son *Mir-Susne-Hum* ("the man observing the world"), who is the patron of men from the time of their birth. It was very important for a common angler, hunter, or reindeer herder to know that the Heavenly Horseman is benevolent to him. So, all of them kept in their homes a sacrificial blanket decorated with figures of galloping equestrians, or equestrian figurines.

In July 1934, a local newspaper published a story about P. K. Moldanov, one of the Kazym Khanty people. He kept in his house "a small horse with a little male horse-rider (a doll) sitting on its back." In the village of Lombovozh, P. E. Sheshkin, a descendant of Mansi's princes, kept among numerous cult attributes a figurine of *Mir-Susne-Hum* in the form of a cavalryman riding a white horse and



Tribute (a donkey)

Bronze figurine of an equestrian

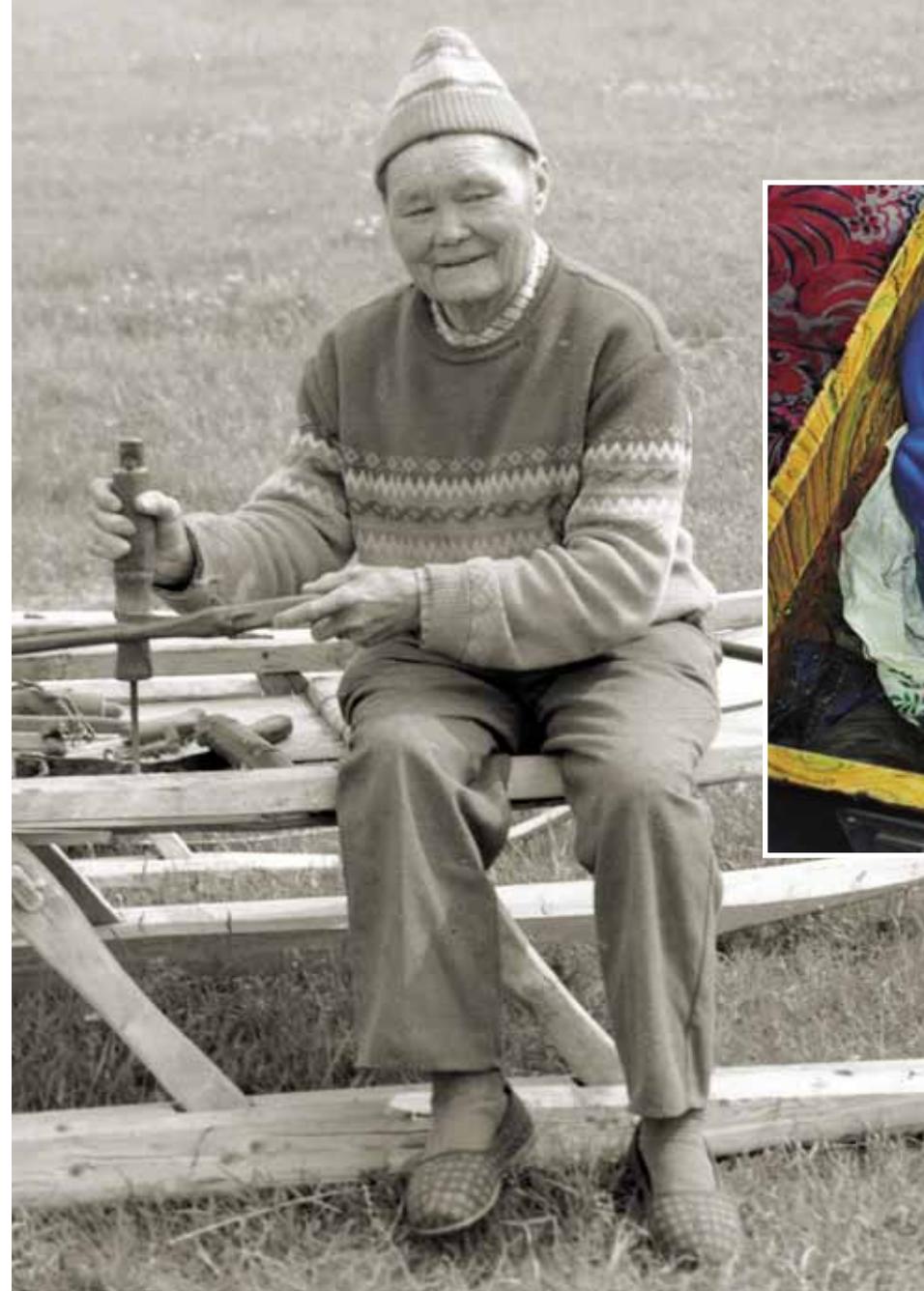
A horse in a home shrine made in the attic

Silver figurine of an equestrian





An equestrian made of papier-mache  
 Bottom: A duck-shaped porcelain salt-cellar, a cult attribute of the Mansi



P.S. Taratov is working with a bow drill, 1986.  
 Photo by A. Loginov  
 Right: A guardian spirit—a frog in a sacred chest

wearing a red uniform with epaulets and a black shako. The figurine was made of papier-mache and wood and was the owner's main fetish. Mansi made him a "scarf" from strips of red woolen cloth.

Metal figurines of equestrians were also objects of worship embodying the image of the Horseman God. For instance, the object personifying *Otyr-Pyg* ("the son of a hero") in T. I. Nomin's home sanctuary on the Severnaya Sosva River was a common piece of copper used to strike sparks from a flint; the copper piece was

shaped as a horse-rider wearing a shako and a sabre on his side and trampling on a two-headed snake. A white ribbon was tied to the rider. In Yukhan-Kurt, the guardian spirit of one family was embodied in a horse figure; that of another family, in a man's figure; both figures were dressed in several layers of robes.

The Ob-Ugrians distinguished horses among other animals as part of the embodiment of the Heavenly Horseman and offered horse figures as well as real horses to the youngest son of the Supreme God.

In an old Mansi shrine on the Kampazh River, we discovered, among other objects used for worshipping *Mir-Susne-Hum*, his "horse," a papier-mache figurine of the animal, which was made in Russia. The white horse was covered with a piece of green cloth, the ends of which were tied around its chest. We also found papier-mache horses dating to the 19th century in home shrines in the Mansi villages of Novaya and Lombovozh and the Khaty villages of Tutleim, Mashpan, Vanzevat, and Pashtory. There is written evidence of finding a rubber



horse wrapped with a red woolen cord with brass finger-rings in a sacred barn on the Synya River; a large children's toy horse on wheels stood in front of the sacred boxes and chest in the attic of P.N. Khudi's house in Zeleny Yar.

### Honor the bear and drink from it

*Em-Vozh-Iki*, or *Yalpus-Oika* ("The Old Man of Sacred City"), was believed to be the mythical ancestor of the Ob-Ugrians and was worshipped in the form of a bear. The phrases "the Old Man living in the forest" or "the Old Man living in an earthen house" were used instead of the tabooed word "bear." Mansi and Khanty believed that *Yalpus-Oika* helped the diseased

and gave him bloody sacrifices. On the Severnaya Sosva and Upper Lozva Rivers, he was offered a black kerchief in the case of insomnia or pregnancy. People believed that *Em-Vozh-Iki* helps women during delivery. "Nimble and quick, flying like a god, he managed to be everywhere, in every village. People often seek assistance of *Em-Vozh-Iki* because he has a determined character



A horse-shaped Russian lock  
Bottom: Deer-shaped figures found among the Ob-Ugrians' cult attributes



A. K. Taratova is working with a deerskin, 1986.  
Photo by A. Loginov



and does everything very quickly.” (E. D. Sambindalova, the Pashtory village).

Since the early Iron Age, the Ob-Ugrians used bronze pendants, bracelets, buckles, etc. of foreign origin, which were decorated with bear-head images, to personify the bear. With the arrival of Russian merchants in the North, the local ritual practices began to use 0.7- and 0.5-liter wine bottles. One of the bottles was labeled with the year of harvest: 1888. The bottles were shaped as a sitting bear wrapped in kerchiefs and pieces of cloth and wearing a bundle of copper rings on the neck. During the ritual, people also used the bottles for their intended purpose, i.e., poured vodka from them into silver shot glasses, which were first offered to the deity. Among the other cult attributes, noteworthy is a New Year tree toy—a cardboard figure of a bear, which was found in one of the sacred chests. The bear was attached to a red woolen ribbon with a coin tied in the corner; there was also a small piece of bearskin sewn to the ribbon.

The owner of a home shrine with a figure of the guardian spirit. Right: A figured rhyton (the 8th or early 9th century, Central Asia) shaped as a girl carrying the head of an antelope in her hands—a guardian spirit of Khanty families



## Watering cans, saltcellars and squeaker toys

One of the incarnations of the Mansi's and Khanty's female deity was the frog; they often used children's toys in their home shrines to personify this deity. The Khanty man named Nov'yukhov from the village of Tutleim kept, among other home fetishes, a rubber frog wrapped in a kerchief; it was supposed to bring good luck in hunting and fishing. The toy personified *Pazhit Ne*, a female deity who was believed to be the patroness of Tutleim. A big plastic and a small rubber frogs dressed in kerchiefs played the role of family patronesses in the house of the Nenets man G.N. Khudi in Zeleny Yar (in the basin of the Polui River).

Many of the deities worshiped by the Ob-Ugrians had an ornithomorphic appearance. Such birds as the owl, eagle,

wagtail, gull, loon, and goose were especially revered by local groups as guardian ancestors. A porcelain figurine of an owl, which was made at M.S. Kuznetsov's factory and tied, together with coins, into a white tied kerchief, served as a heavenly symbol of the Old Man Owl in the deity's sanctuary in the basin of the Severnaya Sosva River. A duck-shaped porcelain saltcellar produced at the same factory was kept in a sacred chest in the attic of the Anyamovs' (a Mansi family) house on the Lyapin River; in this case, the figure also symbolized the owl, who was the guardian spirit of the village. One Mansi fetish found in the Turvat village had a knot of several kerchiefs as its head; the knot contained a silver figurine of a goose made by a Tobolsk craftsman in the middle of the 19th century. A clay bird-whistle (the second half of the 19th century), which served as the family's guardian spirit, was kept in a cult barn near the village of Khor'er. The bird's clothes were sewn by a Khanty craftswoman. The main cult attribute of the Gyndybins, a Mansi family from the Kimk'yasui village, was a squeaker toy made at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries—papier-mache geese on a wooden support; the owners tied a ribbon with copper rings around the toy.

## How the toy replaced the horse

One possible use of Russian toys in the Ob-Ugrian rituals is associated with the so-called temporary replacement of the sacrificial victim. The Ob-Ugrians believed that an animal (horse, sheep, or deer) was the best sacrifice to the gods. However, such a sacrifice was often burdensome for the family budget; not all of the Mansi and Khanty had horses or deer. Thus, instead of a living animal, they could put a horse or deer figure carved from birch bark into the sacred chest and swore to kill a horse or deer at the earliest opportunity. After the sacrifice ritual, the birch bark figures were often kept among other cult attributes.

In addition, for temporary replacement of the sacrificial victim, people often used metal figurines, which they purchased from merchants, e.g., a cooper horse-lock and two deer (the second half of the 19th century). In the Mansi village of Hoshlog, we found a copper horse with a little bell on its neck together with a silver saucer made in Moscow in 1830 and copper and silver coins of the 1840–1890s. The items were wrapped in a silk kerchief. Thus, the temporary sacrifice to the guardian spirits was amplified by extra offerings.



A girl-shaped rhyton amid robes and a coat made of reindeer fur

## Mule magic

Toys and homemade sculptures were also used for magical purpose. They were offered to deities to ensure favorable conditions for hunting/fishing and successful housekeeping and farming. We found in a Mansi chest in the village of Lombovozh a tin toy (which was likely made at the turn of 19th and 20th centuries): two figures—a man walking behind a mule—soldered to a support. The mule's figure was wrapped with a woolen cord and offered to the family's guardian spirit with the request to protect the herd (which meant all domestic animals such as cows, sheep, and horses). In Yukhan-Kurt, the Khanty's home deity at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries was offered metal fish (presumably, needle cases with the inscription "The Sign of Love")—the well-being of the local people was entirely dependent on fishing.



Now when we have listed the notable cases and ways of using toys, metal figurines, and figured tableware in the Mansi and Khanty rituals, it would be logical to discuss the reasons for the existence of these "outlandish" items in the traditional culture of the Ob-Ugric people.

First, toys, figurines, and figured tableware were used in rituals because they looked like one of the deities: an equestrian, bear, bird, or frog. It was this similarity that mattered: the exact species of the character embodied in the toy did not play a key role. It was important that the item was shaped as a bird, and it did not matter much whether it was an owl or duck for the figurine to be used as a cult attribute, even if a specific bird species (eagle, seagull, owl, etc.) was revered as a totem ancestor.

Let me remind you that even in the Middle Ages, the Ob-Ugric ritual practices involved metal figurines: bronze figures of animals and birds, which were made by local craftsmen, and silver figurines of Oriental origin (elephant, monster's head, girl with an antelope's head in her hands, etc.). The Russian toy continued this tradition.



Left: Mansi from the village of Hoshlog, 1984. Photo by A. Sagalaev  
Top: A cooper horse



According to the canon, the Mansi and Khanty were not entitled to making cult attributes themselves; it was only "initiated" people who could make tambourines, sacrificial blankets, wooden idols, etc. However, there was a perpetual need for personal and family fetishes. The way out was to ask another person to make the cult figurine and then "bail it out", or to buy a toy from a traveling merchant.

It should be noted that creating figures of supreme deities was forbidden in some of the local groups of the Ob-Ugric people. For example, the Voguls from the upper reaches of the Lozva River were only allowed to woodcut figures of forest spirits, not those of guardian spirits or deities of a higher rank. In this case, the Russian toy became a good substitute.

Using the purchased items to personify their deities, Mansi and Khanty supplemented them with the necessary details such as scarves, capes, belts, and brass rings and dressed them in kerchiefs and gowns, i.e., adapted the household items to the religious sphere.

I must say that such a smooth integration of commonplace items into the sacral sphere is typical only of these

two small nations—the Khanty and Mansi. Thanks to this unusual practice, their sanctuaries have become "museum collections," which have preserved items from different epochs and cultures.

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