

ETHNOLOGY

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GODS AND HUMANS: LIVING UNDER THE SAME ROOF*

The article integrates the growing knowledge of domestic (family) shrines of the northern Mansi living in the Berezovo District, Khanty-Mansi-Yugra District. Variants of location and composition of ritual paraphernalia are listed. Religious traditions and recent changes they have undergone are discussed. New types of sacrificial cloths, the arrangement of the figures of deities, the characters of the shamanistic practices, unusual ancient artifacts cast of bronze, and late 18th-century silver items are described.

Keywords: Shrines, ritual, sacrifices, shamanism, Mansi, religious traditions.

Introduction

The northern Mansi are one of the largest groups of the Ob-Ugric peoples. They mostly live on the territory of the Berezovo District of the Khanty-Mansi-Yugra District, and their villages are located in the basin of the Northern Sosva and the Lyapin River, its largest left tributary. The object of the study is the home (family) shrines of the northern Mansi, and the subject of the study is their current state.

It has been noted in the literature that when we consider the Ob-Ugric peoples in the 17th–early 18th century, we need to speak about a “village of a single home”; accordingly, the place of worship was bound to the smallest cells of society—families—who possessed home sanctuaries, the central figure of which was the representation of the family patron spirit (Gemuev, 1990).

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The descriptions of the shrines, their variants, and the ways the shrines of this type functioned among the Sosva-Lyapin Mansi from 1983–1997 have been published before (Ibid.; Gemuev, Baulo, 1999). This article is based on materials which were gathered on the expeditions of 1999 and 2006–2014 in the following settlements of the Berezovo District of the Khanty-Mansi-Yugra District: Turvat-paul, Yany-paul, Ust-Tapsui, Khulimsunt, Menkva-paul, Verkhnee Nildino, Kimkyasui, Posoldino, Patrasui, Yasunt, Shchekuriya, Khoshlog, Khurumpaul, Lombovovzh, and Shomy.

Religious and mythological beliefs of the Mansi comprise three realms: the Upper (Heavenly) world, the Middle (Earthly) world, and the Lower (Underground) world. The Upper realm is the place where the demiurge *Numi-Torum* dwells, by whose will the Earth and its population were created. He destroyed the first generation of the *otyrs* warriors for their disgraceful behavior; the warriors of the second generation became the patron spirits for the communities of people, united in origin.

Numi-Torum created forest giants *menkvys*, and finally, people. After that he retired, handing over the control to one of his seven sons. The brother of *Numi-Torum*, the Thunderer *Syakhyl-Torum*, *Etpos-oika* (the Moon), and *Khotal-ekva* (the Sun) also belong to the realm of the Upper World. The father of *Numi-Torum* and *Koschar-Torum*, the grandfather of *Numi-Torum* dwell, respectively, in the second and the third (the uppermost) levels of the Upper World.

Kaltas-ekva, the wife of *Numi-Torum*, and the goddess of fire *Nai-ekva* (*Nai-syan*) dwell in the Middle World (on Earth). *Mir-susne-hum* (“The man looking around the world”), the youngest son of *Numi-Torum*, governs the lives of humans. The god-blacksmith *Sekhryng-oika*, the guardian spirits of the territorial groups and individual families, as well as the forest spirits *menkvys* and *mis-hums* also reside on Earth. *Kul-otyr* and his subordinate *kulis*—the spirits of diseases—belong to the Lower World (Mifologiya mansi, 2001: 16).

Mir-susne-hum, also known as *Ali-hum*, the “Verkhovsky man”, (“kept” by the Sambindalov family in Yany-paul, and the Taratov family in Verkhnee Nildino) and his sons (“kept” by the Anemgurov family in Ust-Tapsui), *Kul-otyr*—“the Prince of the Lower world” (“kept” by the Gyndybin family in Kimkyasui), also known as *Lui-hum*—“The Man of the Lower side” (“kept” by the Sambindalov family in Turvat-paul and Yany-paul), and *Chokhryn-oika*—“Dragonfly-old man” (“kept” by the Dunayev family in Nyaksimvol and by the Puksikov family in Khulimsunt) remain the most important figures among home patron spirits of the northern Mansi in the early 21st century. After the death of a male, his guardian spirits and attributes are inherited by his heirs; in the absence of heirs, they are most commonly brought to the woods to a secluded (“clean”) location or to one of the nearest shrines.

Home shrines: arrangement, composition of attributes, and rituals

Currently, in small villages the Mansi live in log houses with attics of the Russian type. Family fetishes are kept in two locations. The first location is in the living room: it is the so-called “sacred shelf”, covered by a curtain (Fig. 1)*, which is set up in the right or left corner at a height of about 1.5 m from the floor; rare variants include a small cabinet (Fig. 2), attached to the wall. Small chests, suitcases, or bags with family attributes and representations of patron spirits are kept on the shelf (in



Fig. 1. Sacred shelf, covered by a curtain. The oxbow of Lui-paul-urai. Photograph of 2008.



Fig. 2. Sacred shelf in the form of a cabinet. The village of Verkhnee Nildino. Photograph of 2013.

the cabinet). In recent years, the sacredness of the corner shelf began to diminish, and often ordinary household objects such as batteries, medicines, small tools, and so on, are kept on the shelf. The second place where the ritual attributes may be kept inside the house is the attic where the women are forbidden to enter (Fig. 3). “Holy

*The photographs were taken by A.V. Baulo (Fig. 1–6, 8, 10–14, 17–21), E.S. Listyuk (Fig. 7, 15, 16, 24), and V.N. Kavelin (Fig. 9, 22, 23).

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