

Article

Ngytarma and Ngamteru: Concepts of the Dead and (Non)Interactions with Them in Northern Siberia [†]

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Abstract: This article examines some features of the mythological beliefs and funeral rites of Siberia's two related Uralic peoples—the Nenets and the Nganasans. The afterlife fate in the mythology of Nenets and Nganasans is similar—the souls of the dead go to the Lower World, where they continue to live as they lived on Earth. However, the two cultures' attitudes towards the dead have intriguing differences. A comparison of Nenets and Nganasan beliefs and rituals reveals significant correspondences between the ideas about the benevolence of the dead (the Nenets) or their harmfulness (the Nganasans), on the one hand, and the presence of the practices of substitutional incarnation (images of the dead) (the Nenets) or the absence of such images (the Nganasans) on the other. The differences between the Nenets and the Nganasans, as I suggest, are due to the origin and history of the peoples: the Nenets' customs reflect the traditions of the Uralic tribes who came to the far north from Southern Siberia in ancient times. At the same time, the Nganasans' ideas are probably rooted in typical concepts of the Palaeo-Siberian population assimilated by the Uralic tribes.

Keywords: Uralic peoples; Nenets; Nganasans; beliefs; funeral rites; substitutional incarnation; ancestor worship; theories of illness; children's dolls



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1. Introduction

This article examines some features of the mythological beliefs and funeral rites of the two related peoples living in Far North Siberia—the Nenets and the Nganasans. Their languages both belong to the Samoyedic filiation of the Uralic language family. Nenets and Nganasan mythology are similar in many respects, but we see significant differences in how they imagined the relationship between the living and the dead. The Nenets made particular anthropomorphic “receptacles” for the dead, which were “fed” and cared for for three years after death. After this period, other receptacles were made for especially prominent people (shamans; old, honoured men; and women), which were kept in the dwelling and to which help was sought in different situations. The Nganasans did not make images of the dead and did not appeal to them for help. From the Nganasans' point of view, the dead gradually turn into spirits of illnesses and harm the living.

The research question, meticulously crafted, consists of two parts: Firstly, it aims to find correlations between the attitudes towards death; ideas about the benevolence or harmfulness of the dead; the afterlife fate of the human soul, on the one hand; and the presence or absence of anthropomorphic images of the dead (so-called substitutional incarnation practices¹) among the Nenets and the Nganasans. Secondly, the aim of this study was to delve deep into the cause of these differences, leaving no stone unturned in our quest for knowledge.

Both parts of the research question were answered. Firstly, I found a clear correlation between attitudes to death; perceptions of the benevolence or maliciousness of the dead; the afterlife of the human soul, on the one hand; and the presence or absence of anthropomorphic images of the dead among the Nenets and the Nganasans. Secondly, I found that the differences in the history of these people cause these differences. Their Uralic ancestors from South Siberia brought the Nenets' ideas about death and the dead. In contrast, the Nganasans' ideas were apparently inherited from the Palaeo-Siberian population of Taymyr, which became part of the Nganasans.

This article is structured as follows: I briefly describe the two people under study and discuss the sources and methods of research. Then, I discuss the funeral rituals of the Nenets and Nganasans and their concepts of death and the dead. Then, I give a typology of anthropomorphic images among the peoples of Siberia as a whole, followed by a characterization of the Nenets' images of the dead and a description of their practices of substitutional incarnation. After that, I discuss the reasons for the absence of images of the dead among the Nganasans. A comparison of the data on mythology and ritual practices is given in a table. The reasons for these differences between Nenets and Nganasans and general conclusions follow.

The Nenets (previously called the Samoyeds) are an indigenous Uralic people inhabiting vast areas of Northern Russia from the Kola Peninsula to the Taymyr Peninsula (the European coast of the Arctic Ocean and the Yamal, Taz, and Gydan Peninsulas). Today, this is the Arkhangelsk Region and the Yamal-Nenets Autonomous District. The 2021 Russian census counted 49,646 Nenets living in Russia. The Nenets are divided into two unequal groups—from tundras (the majority) and from forests (about 1000 people; exact data are not available). Tundra Nenets are nomads and have been reindeer herders since ancient times. The traditional beliefs of the Nenets are shamanistic, which has now practically disappeared under the influence of the Orthodox Church and the Russian state². Today, Christianity, in the form of Orthodoxy and Protestantism, is widespread among the Nenets, but adherents of traditional beliefs also remain.

The Nganasans (previously called the Samoyeds or the Tawhiti) are an indigenous Uralic people inhabiting the Taymyr Peninsula in North Siberia (now the Taymyrsky Dolgano-Nenets District of Krasnoyarsk Krai). According to the 2021 census, 687 Nganasans are living in Russia. The Nganasans are believed to be descendants of Palaeo-Siberian peoples assimilated by Samoyedic peoples who came from the south. The Nganasans were traditionally nomads, whose primary subsistence was wild reindeer hunting. They lived relatively autonomously until the 1960s, when they began to be settled in the settlements in which they live today (Ust-Avam, Volochanka, and Novaya). The traditional beliefs of the Nganasans are shamanistic, which remained practically untouched by Russian influence until the 1960s and 1970s because of the geographical isolation of the Nganasans.

2. Materials and Methods

This study delves into the realm of traditional (pre-modern) culture, particularly funeral rites, which endured until the 1960s–1970s and were meticulously documented by Soviet ethnographers. Their published ethnographic and folklore materials serve as the cornerstone of my research.

To ascertain whether the funeral rites of the 1960s–1970s era mirror those of more recent times, and to enrich the existing body of knowledge, I present my own fieldwork data. These materials, collected during my expeditions to the Yamal, Taz, and Gydan Peninsulas (1995, 1998, 2000, 2002) and the Taymyr Peninsula (2020, 2023), offer fresh insights.

These materials were collected in different parts of a single territory and were relatively uniform in their content. They differed only in ethnicity—some from the Nenets and others from the Nganasans. I asked the interlocutors in 1995–2002 about their parents' generation and what they remember from their childhood and the informants in 2020–2023 about the generation of both parents and grandparents.

I emphasize that I was interested in the correlation between funeral rituals and ideas about the dead in the past when Nenets and Nganasans preserved the traditional type of economy and way of life. The purpose of this article is not to explore how ideas about death and the dead have evolved in recent decades. However, modern Nenets and Nganasans hold many of the same views as their grandfathers did 50–60 years ago. What they told about their grandmothers and grandfathers, parents, and sometimes about themselves was similar to what we can read in the works of Soviet ethnographers.

3. Discussion

Anthropomorphic images of Siberian peoples made of wood, cloth, and stone (*ongons*, according to Dmitry Zelenin) (Zelenin 1936)³ can be divided into three groups: supernatural entities, people, and dolls. These groups are different in their composition (for example, the category of “supernatural entity” includes many more personages than the category of “substitute for a human” or, even more so, “baby doll”; however, this also depends on the particular tradition) and are pretty clearly demarcated within a culture. However, the boundaries between these categories of personages are quite easy to overcome. For example, the Nenets have belief narratives that a toy doll that is not put away at night is inhabited by a *ngyleka*, an evil spirit of the Lower World⁴. The Nenets also believe that anthropomorphic figures *ngytarma*, the substitutes of the dead, over time, become *hehe* (a guardian spirit of the clan) or *tadyobtsyo* (a spirit assistant of shamans) (Lehtisalo 1998, p. 112; Sokolova 1990, p. 67).

Among these anthropomorphic images, a special place is occupied by the so-called “dolls of the dead”—substitutes for the deceased. These images are typical for many peoples of Siberia (Zelenin 1936, p. 259).

Let us examine the personages into which a human being turns after his death, according to the beliefs of Nenets and Nganasans.

The afterlife fate in the mythology of Nenets and Nganasans is similar—the souls of the dead go to the world of the dead, where they continue to live as they lived on Earth—to hunt, fish, and nomad with reindeer herds. The deceased’s world is located in the Lower World, both underground and in the north/north-west, where the northern rivers (Ob and Yenisei) flow and where the sun sets. In the winter, the living can see the sun of the Lower World—the aurora borealis. Living people may even meet the dead at night near burial sites, which are also considered part of the Lower World (Nenets and Nganasans have above-ground burials). The Nenets and the Nganasans consider the dead to be rather dangerous spirits that can cause illnesses and death. At the same time, the two peoples had different attitudes towards the dead and burial customs.

3.1. The Nenets

The Nenets fear the dead (*halmer*) and do not visit cemeteries to commemorate them (Figure 1).

However, they believe that the dead live their separate lives in the Lower World and do not especially persecute the living. After a person’s death, before or immediately after burial, the Nenets (primarily Khabi, clans of Khanty⁵ origin) made a *sidryang* ‘shadow’, ‘double’, derived from *sidya* ‘two’, for each deceased person, except for small children (Tereshchenko 1965, pp. 557–58). The face of the *sidryang* was a button or a coin, the body—a wooden chump, but often the body was missing, and a specially sewn small garment replaced it.

For about three years, the *sidryang* was kept in the dwelling (*chum*). At mealtimes, he was seated at the table and “fed” with the steam from the hot food. He had his cup, spoon, and snuff box. The figure was put to “sleep” in the place of the deceased, and once a month, a reindeer was slaughtered for him. At the end of this period, the *sidryang* was burnt or buried in a small coffin not far from the person’s burial place (Khomich 1966, pp. 208–9; Kharyuchi 2001, p. 140). According to Toivo Lehtisalo’s earlier materials, three years after the death, the figurine was left in a specially made wooden hut in the

cemetery, and sacrifices were made to it four times a year until it rotted away. After that, all communication with the substitute of the deceased (and, consequently, with the latter) ceased. Lehtisalo suggests that the Nenets of the Lower Ob accepted the custom of making special huts for the substitutes of the dead from the Khanty people (Lehtisalo 1998, p. 112). The Khanty also made a *sidryang* and kept it until they were sure that a child had been born in whom the soul of that deceased person had been reborn (Sokolova 1990, p. 213).



Figure 1. Halmer. Nenets burial site. Photo by Yuri Kvashnin. Gydan, 2018.

The Nenets believed that after the funeral of a *sidryang*, i.e., “second death”, the deceased turns into a *si bug*, and communication with him ceases (Golovnev 1985, p. 46; Gracheva 1971, p. 252)⁶. However, if the deceased was a shaman, a long-lived man, or a successful hunter, before the “second funeral”, the *sidryang* was asked, raising his head, if he wished to become a *ngytarma* (*iterma*, *ittarma*, or *ytterma* in Khanty). In the case of consent (if the head of the *sidryang* became heavy), the figurine was stripped of its clothes and hidden under the roots of a tree, and the remaining head was dressed in a new vestment (Golovnev 1985, p. 47).

The Asian Nenets of other clan groups (not of Khanty origin) did not make a *sidryang*. Seven to ten years after death, only a *ngytarma* figurine was made for some deceased people, especially shamans. According to Galina Gracheva, a shaman of the *sambon* category (his “specialty” was sending the dead to the afterlife) went to the cemetery and, on his return, told the relatives of the deceased that the corpse had decomposed, and the deceased had turned into an insect, “walking on the ground, standing on his feet, which means that he would live, asking his relatives for a home”, after which he cut off the upper part of one of the poles surrounding the coffin and made an image from it, which was kept in the family of the deceased (Gracheva 1971, p. 252).

According to Andrei Golovnev’s materials collected from the Nenets of Yamal in the 1980s–1990s, *ngytarma* was made immediately or several years after the death of a shaman or a long-lived person on the instructions of a *sambona* shaman (Golovnev 1985, p. 45). Very old people could be called *ngytarma*, even during their lifetime (Lehtisalo 1998, p. 111; Kharyuchi 2001, p. 140). According to Ludmila Khomich, European Nenets also made a *ngytarma* figurine seven to ten years after the death of shamans, long-livers, or other prominent people (Khomich 1966, p. 208).

In the Nenets culture, the placement of *ngytarma* and *hehe* (guardian spirits of the clan) holds significant meaning. While *hehe* were kept in the sacred part of the *chum* or on a special sacred sledge (*hehe khan*), the *ngytarma* were placed in the living part of the *chum*, specifically in the headboard of beds, and were carried in a woman's sledge. This practice was rooted in the belief that the woman's sledge was considered unclean and should not carry sacred objects. The Nenets viewed everything related to the deceased as '*samai*', meaning 'unclean', and 'not afraid of other uncleanness' (Khomich 1966, p. 208).

However, unlike the *sidryang*, which "was considered almost a living being" (Khomich 1966, p. 209), the connection between the *ngytarma* and its prototype is less pronounced, which is due to the more extended period of keeping the figurine in the dwelling (sometimes, it was kept "forever"—for several generations) (Khomich 1966, p. 208). In addition, the face of the *ngytarma* is a stylized image, whereas the face of the *sidryang* was given the individual features of the deceased (Golovnev 1985, p. 46). *Ngytarma* differs from *sidryang* in several other ways: he was "fed" rarely, about once every six months (Figure 2), and was not put to "sleep". At the same time, *ngytarma* had essential functions that the *sidryang* did not have. For example, *ngytarma* was used for fortune-telling, weather forecasting, and to calm a storm. The Nenets believed it guarded their dwellings and looked for lost reindeer. The shaman's *ngytarma* was used for healing—it was applied to sore places (Khomich 1966, p. 209; Golovnev 1985, p. 46; Kharyuchi 2001, p. 140; Gemuev 1990, pp. 211–12).

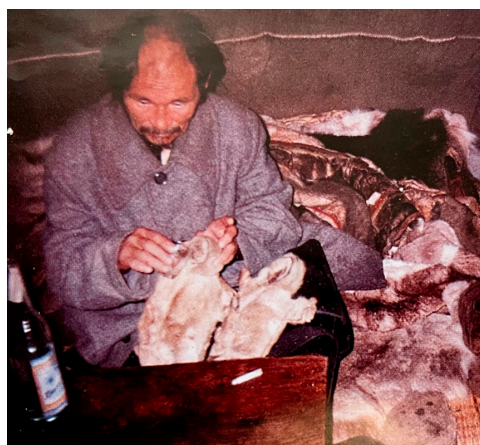


Figure 2. Feeding the *ngytarma* with vodka. Gydan, 1990s. Photo by Galina Kharyuchi (Kharyuchi 2001, Figure 28).

According to Lehtisalo, European Nenets did not make *sidryang* figures; only *ngytarma* were made for shamans and honoured elders. Based on this fact, he argued that the latter type of anthropomorphic images (*ngytarma*) was a common Nenets form, whereas the *sidryang* type was adopted from the Northern Khanty people (Lehtisalo 1998, p. 112). Other researchers have a similar opinion (Khomich 1966, p. 208; Golovnev 1985, p. 45).

3.2. The Nganasans

The Nganasan funeral tradition differs significantly from the Nenets'. In the burial rite, the substitute of the deceased was one of the relatives of the same sex as the person who died. He was constantly near the deceased and conducted a ritual dialogue with relatives on his behalf. Immediately after the funeral, *argish* (a caravan of reindeer carriages) left for the tundra for the burial (Figure 3); the remaining people packed up their belongings and left, making good tracks. At the old camp, they left staves and *chum* covers on the side where the deceased lay. For three years, certain precautions were observed (for example, they did not mention the dead person's name) (Popov 1936, pp. 57–61). The soul of the deceased, *sydangka*⁷, was fed by the relatives by throwing pieces of food into the fire of the household. Feeding the soul of the deceased was performed only after the funeral, so that

the soul did not return from the road to the land of the dead and did not “take away” any of the living with it (Gracheva 1993, p. 34; Golovnev 1985, p. 45).



Figure 3. *Matalirma*. Nganasan burial site. Photo by Larisa and Stanislav Stryuchkovy (Krashevskii 2010, p. 193).

Sydangka, the shadow soul of the deceased, was considered a harmful spirit, like other spirits, such as *ngamteru* and *barusi*. In their appearance, all these spirits (*sydangka*, *ngamteru*, and *barusi*) are similar: they are one-armed, one-legged, and one-eyed and have half a nose instead of a nose. The Nganasans said they “lose themselves over time” (Gracheva 1976, p. 52). However, people’s attitude towards *sydangka* was more relaxed. Nganasans believe that it does not bring any particular troubles, is not “evil” yet, and “does not eat” people. However, a few years after a person’s death, his or her *sydangka* turned into *ngamteru*, a very dangerous and evil spirit. Its dwelling place is the same as that of the *sydangka*, near the grave, but the *ngamteru* can go far away from this place. Most often, narratives about *ngamteru* are associated with shamanic burials (Gracheva 1976, pp. 52–53).

The Nganasans say *ngamteru* tends to get into the head and eat the brain. A person who has caught *ngamteru* “in his mind” is called *tolimeimi’e* (“has become stolen”). The shaman’s main task in such a case was to convince the person that the *ngamteru* has not entered him; otherwise, “it will be awful: some will shoot themselves, some will hang themselves, some will stab themselves right in the heart. The shaman used to drive out the *ngamteru*” in the same way as the spirits of illnesses from a person (Gracheva 1976, pp. 52–53).

After a more extended period, *ngamteru* turned into *barusi*, a spirit bringing illnesses (Gracheva 1976, p. 52). According to Andrei Popov, *barusi* are the souls of the dead who came to earth from the Lower World to hunt people, as people hunt wild reindeers (Popov 1976, p. 43). The Nganasans said that the *ngamteru* and the *barusi* eat the heart of living people, gnawing the *nilti* (‘breath’). Many illnesses were attributed to them. If a piece of food fell during a meal, people did not pick it up, saying: “Let the *barusi* eat” or “A dead relative is hungry, let him eat” (Gracheva 1976, pp. 52–54).

The difference between these mythological personages is that *sydangka* is still connected with a particular deceased person. Thus, if the late person is seen in a dream, people say, the “*Sydangka* of such-and-such came” (Gracheva 1976, p. 54). *Ngamteru* can also be of an unknown deceased person (one remembers well whose soul it is only if the person was a shaman or shamaness during his lifetime). *Barusi* is never associated with a particular person.

3.3. Comparison

In Tables 1 and 2, I present the personages of Nenets and Nganasan beliefs connected with the postmortem existence of the human soul, their names, characters, features of images, and functions. I compared the characteristics of these personages with the particularities of some belief figures (deities and evil spirits) and their images, as well as with the characteristics of children’s dolls.

Table 1. The Nenets.

Name of Personage	<i>Sidryang</i> *	<i>Ngytarma</i> **	<i>Hehe, Siadey, and Tadyobtsy</i>	<i>Ngyleka</i> **	<i>Uko and Nguhuko</i>
The character of the personage	The shadow soul of the deceased for about 3 years after death	The shadow soul of highly respected persons (shamans and deep elders) 7–10 years after death	Spirit guardians and spirit masters of loci and spirit assistants of the shaman	The evil spirit and the spirit of illness	A doll or a children’s toy
Image	Permanent and made by relatives before the burial of the deceased	Permanent and made by a shaman or relatives on his instructions, and he “revives” it	Permanent and made by a shaman	Not permanent and occasionally used for healing; made by a shaman	Permanent and anyone can perform it; includes children (girls)
Body	No	Yes (usually)	Yes	Yes	No
Clothes	Yes	Yes (maybe several sets)	Maybe (the <i>siadeys</i> do not have it)	No	Yes
Face	Yes, <i>longay</i> (a copper button or coin)	Yes (usually)	Maybe (the <i>siadeys</i> definitely do have it ***)	Yes	Goose (duck) beak
Behaviour towards a human being	Passive (a human takes care of it—feeds it, puts it to bed, etc.)	Active and patronizing (predicts the weather, calms storms, guards the dwelling, searches for lost reindeer, and heals)	Active and determined by a human being’s actions	Active and harmful (inhabits a person and causes illnesses)	Passive

* A shadow soul, a double of a person, from *sidya* ‘two’, cf. *sydangka* (Nganas.). ** From *ngyl* ‘the bottom’ (cf.: Nga—the Lord of the Lower World), cf. Nganasan terms: *Nga/o* ‘sky’, ‘weather’; *nilti* ‘life’, ‘breath’; *Nilyty Ngo*—the deity of the Upper World, *nganasa* ‘man’. *** *Siadey*—a pointed wooden stake with the image of a face in the upper part, from *aid* ‘face’.

Table 2. The Nganasans.

Name of Personage	<i>Sydangka/Sydaranka</i>	<i>Ngamteru</i>	<i>Kuoyka, Nguo, and Dyamada.</i>	<i>Barusi, Kocha, and Syrada</i>	– *
The character of the personage	The shadow soul of the deceased for about 3 years after death	The shadow soul of highly respected persons (shamans and elders) 7–10 years after death	Spirit guardians and spirit masters of loci and spirit assistants of the shaman	The evil spirit and the spirit of illness	A doll or a children’s toy
Image	No	No	Permanent and made by a shaman	No	–
Body			Yes		
Clothes			Maybe		
Face			Maybe		
Behaviour towards a human being	Neutral	Active and harmful (inhabits a person and causes illnesses)	Active and determined by a human being’s actions	Active and harmful (inhabits a person and causes illnesses)	

* No data.

The tables draw attention to how different in their semantics are the personages of Nenets and Nganasans into which a person turns after death, despite the similarity of their names (*sidryang* and *sydangka*, *ngytarma* and *ngamteru*). The differences between them are so striking that even the similarity of terms has previously prevented researchers from comparing these personages with each other. However, such a comparison allows for essential conclusions to be drawn. Firstly, these data can be regarded as another confirmation of the fact that, firstly, the Nganasans have a strong Palaeo-Siberian substrate and, secondly, the Nenets are close to the Ugrian world and other cultures of the taiga and forest-steppe zone.

In Siberia, the custom of creating anthropomorphic images of the dead appeared in the 1st millennium B.C. The bearers of the Tagar archaeological culture (Southern Siberia, VII-III centuries B.C.) mummified the dead and, having covered their faces with clay masks; kept them for a long time; periodically “fed” them; and then, as they accumulated and naturally deteriorated, burned them. The Tashtyk culture (South Siberia, 2nd century B.C.E.–5th century A.D.) was characterized by a different custom: they made human-sized leather dummy dolls, stuffed them with grass, and put a sack with ashes from the cremated body inside. A clay mold of the deceased’s face was used as a mask. Both variants co-existed for several centuries, and the first method was replaced by the second. At the same time, the rite of the “second burial” of mummies was transferred to dummy dolls: they were periodically “fed”, and when the crypt was filled, they were burnt.

The Uralic-speaking ancestors of the Nenets and Khanty came to the North from South Siberia and inherited the funerary traditions of the Tagar and Tashtyk cultures. Nenets and Khanty “dolls of the dead” are heirs of these ancient practices of substitutional incarnation (Vadetskaia 1985, pp. 36–38). One of the possible pieces of evidence of the evolutionary continuity of rituals may be the custom of covering the face of the *ngytarma* with an iron mask, with slits for eyes (Khomich 1977, p. 22).

Anthropomorphic images of the dead have been central to a long-standing scholarly debate about whether an ancestor cult existed in Siberia. The opinions of researchers have varied. Of course, it is possible to assert that there was no ancestor cult in Siberia only from a cross-cultural perspective when comparing it with more developed traditions in this respect (Shishlo 1972, pp. 66–72). Researchers of Siberian cultures agreed that there was a cult of ancestors in Siberia, which is proved by one of the “dolls of the dead” types, *ngytarma*. A detailed overview of the opinions can be found in (Gemuev 1990, pp. 206–12). The making and honouring of *sidryang* figurines is not a form of an ancestor cult but the final stage of funeral rites (Golovnev 1985, p. 46). The primary function of *sidryang* is to provide the soul of the deceased with a temporary shelter for the period of getting used to the afterlife (Pavlovskii 1907, p. 196) or preparing for reincarnation in a descendant (Sokolova 1990, p. 213; Gemuev 1990, pp. 207–12). Boris Shishlo calls this function “the most ancient task of ‘cultivation’ of the soul” (Shishlo 1972, p. 72).

On the other hand, making a figurine as a container can also be seen as a way of localizing a potentially harmful spirit “with whom one can settle relations by feeding” (Shishlo 1972, p. 71). One can see confirmation of this hypothesis in the fact that, according to the Khanty, the deceased will take revenge if his relatives do not make him a *sidryang* or do not feed it (Gondatti 1888, p. 67). However, according to more recent and detailed studies, the spirit’s revenge, as well as its hostility in general, can be caused by only one thing: the absence of the possibility of a rapid rebirth in a new member of its clan group (Gemuev 1990, p. 207). Such a mood, of course, is incomparable with that ontological hostility of the deceased towards the living, which it possesses in Nganasan beliefs.

We discover a rather curious correlation here. In Nenets culture, there is a clear correspondence between the presence of ancestral images (*ngytarma*) and a more relaxed attitude towards the dead (*halmers*). According to Nenets beliefs, the dead are included in social relations in their own position: being “out there”, they are helpful “in here” because they can do things that the living cannot do (for example, control the weather). The opposite situation is observed among the Nganasans: they do not make images of the dead, and

the latter are considered exceptionally dangerous. The dead are identified with spirits of illnesses, and the living do not maintain any mutually beneficial relations with them.

The correspondence between the practices of substitutional incarnation (making and feeding anthropomorphic figures representing the dead) and attitudes towards the deceased is also recognized within the culture. For example, according to the informants of Izmail Gemuev, the *ngytarma* is made of wood, and a coin is necessarily placed on his chest “instead of his heart” “so that he does not turn into a devil” (Gemuev 1990, p. 208) (Figure 4).

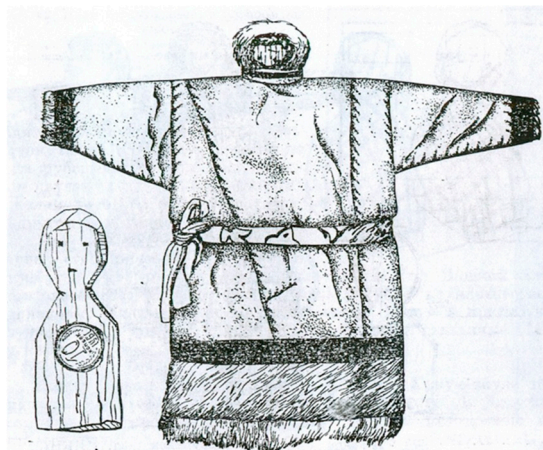


Figure 4. *Ngytarma* (Gemuev 1990, p. 59).

It is essential that not only “dolls of the dead” are not found in the Nganasan culture, but also anthropomorphic images in general are almost absent. It seems incredible, but this culture in its traditional (pre-Soviet) form did not have toy dolls. The situation is different among the Nenets. They had children’s dolls, such as *uko* (western dialects) or *nguhuko* (eastern dialects). Such a doll had no face; its base was a goose or duck beak, and it was dressed in human clothes sewn by girls (Orlova 1926, pp. 147–48) (Figure 5).



Figure 5. *Nguhuko*. The Nenets (Khomich 1966, S.p. Colour inlay).

According to some researchers, earlier, such dolls may have had ritual significance, serving as “child deities”: dolls’ heads were made from the beaks of migratory waterfowl, “pure” creatures that annually flew to the supreme god *Num* (Zhuravskii 1911, pp. 22–23). According to Lyudmila Khomich, this point of view is not unreasonable due to the proximity of children’s toys to sacred anthropomorphic images; however, she notes, already in the early 20th century, these dolls were not given religious significance (Khomich 1966, p. 184). A somewhat different opinion is expressed by the Nenets today. In 2002, in Salekhard, Valentina Nyarui told a legend (*va’al*) that one girl did not put her dolls away at night, and the dolls grew up at night and ate the whole family. I asked Valentina, “How could the *nguhuko* dolls eat people? They are children’s toys; they are not alive?” Valentina replied,

“Everything is alive; everything has a soul”. Another example is the following: one of Galina Kharyuchi’s informants has a personal guardian spirit, a *nguhuko* doll given to her by her young son (Kharyuchi 2001, p. 174).

4. Conclusions

The research question, a complex and multifaceted inquiry, consisted of two parts: Firstly, it aimed to find correlations between the attitude towards death; ideas about the benevolence or harmfulness of the dead; the afterlife fate of the human soul, on the one hand; and the presence or absence of anthropomorphic images of the dead (so-called substitutional incarnation practices) among the Nenets and the Nganasans at the traditional, pre-modern stage of their cultures. Secondly, this study aimed to discover the cause of these differences.

Through meticulous research and analysis, both parts of the research question have been successfully answered, marking a significant milestone in our understanding of cultural practices and beliefs. These findings not only deepen our comprehension of the Nenets and the Nganasans at the traditional, pre-modern stage of their cultures but also contribute to the broader field of cultural studies.

Thus, in the example of the Northern Samoyeds, we observe clear correspondences between the peculiarities of funeral rites, ideas about death and the dead, and the presence or absence of anthropomorphic images (including children’s toys) in the culture. The Nenets feared the dead (*halmer*) and did not visit cemeteries. However, they believed that the dead lived their separate lives in the Lower World and did not particularly persecute the living. The Nenets made images of the dead from wood and dressed them in clothes made of reindeer skin and cloth. Immediately after death, relatives of the deceased created such images (*sidryang*). These figures (“dolls of the dead”) were “fed” and “put to sleep” in the place of the deceased. After about three years, these figures were taken to the grave and left there. However, if the dead were a significant person (a shaman or a respected older adult), a new image was made from a wooden fragment of the grave structure. People addressed such figures (*ngytarma*) for help with various problems (to stop a blizzard, to find lost reindeer, to suggest good hunting places, and so on). As a sign of gratitude, people dressed and “fed” the *ngytarma* figures and gave them gifts.

The Nganasans were also afraid of the dead and did not approach burial places in the tundra. They believed that the soul of the dead *sydangka* transforms into *ngamteru*, a dangerous and evil spirit. In turn, the *ngamteru* eventually turns into *barusi*, the spirit of illness, who comes to the living to hunt and eat them just as the living hunt reindeer, thus causing illnesses and death. The Nganasans did not make images of the dead and did not seek their help. Also, the Nganasans barely had any anthropomorphic images, not even baby dolls. The Nenets had anthropomorphic child dolls.

These differences in the cultures of two neighbouring and related peoples are due to their differences in origins and history. The Nenets’ customs reflect the traditions of the Uralic tribes, who came to the far north from Southern Siberia in ancient times. These tribes already practiced substitutional incarnation. At the same time, the Nganasans’ beliefs and practices are rooted in typical concepts of the Palaeo-Siberian population assimilated by the Uralic tribes.

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Notes

- 1 The substitutional incarnation practices mean the creation of a particular “receptacle” from wood and/or cloth for the “soul” of the deceased and the interaction of the living with this receptacle (“doll of the dead”).
- 2 The influence of the Russian state on indigenous peoples is a big topic. I will only say here that in Russia, the state persecuted traditional religious systems from the 18th century and especially in the 20th century under Soviet rule. From the 1920s onwards, the state initiated changes in the economic lifestyles of the indigenous peoples of Siberia, and from the 1930s onwards, there was forced Russification. For more details, see (Slezkine 1994).
- 3 *Ongon* is a Turkic and Mongolian word for ancestral spirits and their images. In his book, Dmitry Zelenin used this word to describe the religious artifacts of all peoples of Siberia.
- 4 “Dolls should be put away at night. One girl did not put them away, and the dolls grew up at night and ate the whole family” (documentary film “Legends and Reality of the Nenets family”. International Fund for Cultural Initiatives “Big Arctic”, 2002. Script writer V. Nyarui, director V. Krylov). Valentina Nyarui told me that she recorded this “legend” (*va'al*) in Yamal from an elderly Nenets, whose name she did not specify (Nyarui 2002).
- 5 The Khantys (previously called the Ostyaks) are a Finno-Ugric language speaking people belonging to the Uralic language family. The Khantys are indigenous inhabitants of Western Siberia (now Khanty-Mansiysk Autonomous Okrug).
- 6 *Si* literally means ‘pure’; it is also the name of the sacred part of the dwelling (*chum*).
- 7 The word is cognate to Nenets *sidryang*, which is also derived from Nenets *sidya*, ‘two’ (Gracheva 1976, p. 46).

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