

## Construction of the Ethnographic Visual Image of Komi-Zyrians in the “Artistic Ethnology” of the Late 19<sup>th</sup> – 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries

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The article discusses the history of construing and representing the ethnographic image of Komi-Zyrians in popular and academic literature of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries by analysing painted, porcelain and postcard images of Komi-Zyrians of the 19<sup>th</sup> – early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Special attention is paid to how Komi ethnicity was visualized on the basis of reproducing stereotypically the “Depicted Zyrian” images. On the basis of these images, the topic of the possible influence of retrospective ethnographic research on the popular beliefs of how a Komi-Zyrian should look like is raised and discussed. It is suggested that both Russian and Western scholars followed the ideology of “Finno-Ugric authenticity” in the ethnographic visual images of Komi they constructed: all the artefacts, which could be associated with Russian or other not Finno-Ugric cultures were literally or symbolically removed from the images or downgraded to “insignificant texts”. Finally the possibility of a correct translation of the ethno-cultural heritage by the means of the modern media technologies – the ones that promote ethnic images into virtual images of the cyberspace – is critically discussed.

**Keywords:** Komi-Zyrians, Ethnographic image, virtual ethnic images

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## INTRODUCTION

Up until the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, the ethnographic images of Komi-Zyrians were mostly oral and textual, very few engravings and lithographs notwithstanding. The visual image of the inhabitants of the Komi area along with that of other so called “aliens

(*inorodtsy*) of the Russian Empire” was formed on the basis of observations and recordings, mostly those related to the traditional clothes and physical traits, made by travellers and researchers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the travel notes and research reports produced by these travellers and researchers, one could routinely find short descriptions of the traditional life of peoples they met and, sometimes, sketch drawings of their appearance. In the case of Komi people, these rare drawings represent an invaluable source of information about the folk clothes, because none of the earlier archived written documents of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries allow tracing ethnic and cultural elements of the clothes in such a way as to recognize any differences between the Komi clothing and that of the Russians of the Vologda and Arkhangelsk provinces, not to say about differences between folk dress of different local groups of Komi, the Izhma-Komi reindeer herding nomads being the only exception (Zherebtsov, 1973). Indeed, the ethnographic descriptions left by travellers of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century clearly suggest that the Izhma Komi reindeer herders, who led a nomadic way of life on the border between the Slavic, Finno-Ugric and Samoyedic cultural areas, were the only group of Komi, who used their clothes (their decoration, design and the way to wear them) as one of their ethnic markers and a way to express their ethnic identity and ethnic consciousness in their multi-ethnic environment (Konakov, Kotov, 1991: 127–137).

This article focuses on the process through which Komi ethnicity became visualized in the public and academic discourses of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as a result of the stereotypical reproduction of the “depicted Zyrian” images from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The themes related to the processes of ethnicity visualization, construction and (self/re)presentation of ethnographic images, have been attracting interest of western anthropologists since the middle of the last (20<sup>th</sup>) century (Collier, 1967; Edwards, 1992; Harper, 1987; Pinney, 2011). Mihály Hoppál, the well-known Hungarian anthropologist and specialist on Siberian shamanism, wrote that Russian siberianists already used the description method currently known in western anthropology as ‘visual ethnographic narrative’ in their field studies of shamans’ images in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Hoppál, 1989: 87). This method consists of producing series of drawings, so-called fieldwork sketches of the research objects along with photographs and detailed verbal ethnographic descriptions. Interestingly, the recent actualization of anthropologists’ post-colonial reflection on the early and middle 20<sup>th</sup> century history of construction of the ethnographic images particularly in photographs and movies (this reflection is evident in publications of the 1990s – 2000s) coincided with their renewed interest in ethnographic drawing and in drawn ethnographic images as a method of recording ethnographic data and investigating ethnicity. Several researchers stated that the history of ethnographic drawing reflects well the early stages of the development of social anthropology methods as well as the role visual images play in anthropological research (Geismar, 2014; Bray, 2015; Causey, 2016). Unfortunately, it was only very recently that the interest towards ethnographic drawing and drawn ethnographic images as stereotypical visual narratives emerged also in Russia. The first Russian publications on the topic include works by E. A. Vishlenkova (2011), E. B. Tolmacheva (2011) and M. V. Leskinen (2013), which contain, besides empirical analyses, also interesting methodological considerations. One should also mention recent publications by A. V. Golovnev and T. S. Kisser (Golovnev, Kisser, 2015; Kisser, 2017; Golovnev, 2019), which demonstrate the methodological importance of studying the “priority” of visual images in the development of Russian descriptive ethnography.

It is in this methodological and theoretical context that research on the history of visualizing Komi-Zyrians as one of the groups of “Russian aliens (*inorodtsy*)” and representatives of Finno-Ugric people can make a contribution. Indeed, there is every reason to think that in the late 19<sup>th</sup> – early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, it was researchers of the cultural tradition (i.e. ethnographers and anthropologists) rather than its carriers and users (i.e. the Komi-Zyrians themselves), who made the judgement about the authenticity of the “ethnographic portrait of Zyrians” and, furthermore, worked out the criteria for such a judgement. At the same time, both Russian and western museum collections of traditional clothes from the Komi area are the result of multilevel filtering and distilling aimed at getting rid of “outside spoiling” and finding, isolating and representing the “pure Zyrian tradition”. It can be suggested, furthermore, that both the field research and the data analysis performed by the researchers reflected not only – and even not so much – the scientific aims and standards but also ideological aims and biases of the international Finno-Ugric community and demands by the “intracultural audience”.

In this context, the following questions arise: 1. How much the artistic tradition of depicting and visualizing Komi-Zyrians and their ethnic traits reflected historical and cultural reality and how much it represented an ideological construct and reflected stereotypical views of researchers and artists on how an authentic Komi-Zyrian, a representative of one of Finno-Ugric peoples, should look like? 2. Why both Russian and Western researchers, specialists in Finno-Ugric cultures and peoples of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, despite having huge fieldwork experience, undeniable mastery of recording ethnographic facts and the availability of technical means for a relatively objective fixation of visual images such as photography and filming, still preferred “scientifically reconstructed” (and, as I hope to show, inevitably ideologically constructed) images of authentically looking Komi-Zyrians?

Replying to these questions is important not only for methodological reasons – that is for establishing just how much ethnographic drawings and other visual images of this period are reliable as a source of ethnographic information on Komi – but also for cultural and social ones. Indeed, the artistic tradition of depicting Komi-Zyrians established by these images is still very much alive. It influences the way Komi ethnic culture is represented in museums, in ethnographic replicas of folk costumes, in internet, in theatre and, sometimes, even in socio-political discourse. How much does this tradition reflect ethnographic facts and how much does it reflect ideological beliefs? What factors give rise to these beliefs? Despite the fact that these questions are obviously important and actual, they have never been asked by Komi ethnographers and anthropologists. These are questions this article attempts to answer.

Empirically this paper is based on the following data: 1. Drawn images and portraits of Komi-Zyrians published in Russian and Western publications of the late 19<sup>th</sup> – early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, both academic and oriented to a wide audience; 2. Descriptions of ethnographic mannequins representing Komi-Zyrians in international and Russian exhibitions (exhibitions of 1867, 1878, 1900); 3. Images of Komi-Zyrians printed on postcards of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, including rare postcards from museum collections; 4. The porcelain figure of Komi-Zyrian from the famous collection of porcelain figures “Peoples of Russia” produced by Pavel Kamenski (1910). Besides that, published academic works of Moscow, Leningrad and Syktyvkar ethnography schools (see Semenov, Teryukov and Sharapov, 2006) have been used to analyse how Komi-Zyrians and their culture were visualized during the Soviet Period. Finally, observations of the modern

presentations of “constructed” images of ethnic Komi in museums, souvenirs, fashion, theatre and mass-media made by the author himself are used for discussing the modern state of the artistic tradition of depicting Komi-Zyrians. Documentary and photographic images of Komi, including those circulated in academic and popular literature to represent Komi culture and tradition, are deliberately ignored in this paper, because ethnographic photography and ethnographic documentary films represent a whole separate topic of research in the field of ethnicity visualization.

### “DEPICTED” KOMI-ZYRIANS

One of the first coloured lithographs depicting Komi-Zyrians can be found in the famous book “Ethnographic Descriptions of Peoples of Russia” (Fig. 1.) by Gustave Theodor Pauly; the first version of this book in French was published in St-Petersburg in 1862 (Pauly, 1862; Pauli, 2007). In the introduction to this book, the author says that all illustrative pictures in the volume have been made in the field in the course of expeditions performed by the Russian Geographic Society (Zhabreva, 2007).

This picture has become the canonic image of Komi-Zyrians. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was re-printed with variations in a number of Russian and western popular and reference books. Thus, it was reprinted on the famous ethnographic map “Russia and the tribes populating it” by N. A. Terebenev published in 1866 (Terebenev, 1866) as well as in the illustrated album “Peoples of Russia” (Fig. 2.) published in 1878 (*Narody Rossii*, 1878: 100).

In 1875, the figures of Komi-Zyrians taken from this lithography (this time without the Votyaks) were re-printed in black-and-white in the Finnish illustrated book “Peoples of Russia related to Finns” (Kari, 1875: 153; see Fig. 3.).

### MANNEQUINS REPRESENTING KOMI-ZYRIANS AT ETHNOGRAPHIC EXHIBITIONS

The authenticity of the Komi-Zyrian costumes depicted on the illustrations of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century discussed above can be checked against the “real” female festive costume



Fig. 1. “Zyrian woman. Votyak woman. Votyak man and Zyrian man.” A lithograph by Vial. Taken from Pauly, 1862: 20.





Fig. 2. "Votyaks and Zyrians" as depicted in the "Peoples of Russia" album (taken from: *Narody Rossii*, 1878: 100).



Fig. 3. "Zyrian is leaving for hunting" (Kari, 1875: 153).

and male hunting costume of Komi presented to Russian and foreign audience of the Ethnographic Exhibition organized in Moscow in 1867. The surviving photos from this exhibition prove that, among a number of material items exhibited to describe cultures of almost all ethnic groups living the Russian Empire and organized by territories of their origin, it was almost impossible to differentiate between the female festive costume of Komi and costumes of Russian female peasants of the Vologda and Arkhangelsk provinces. In the published description of the Ethnographic Exhibition there is a comment that the Tzar, who visited the Exhibition and examined, among other items exhibited, the mannequin dressed in the male hunting costume of Komi, took interest only in "the gun held by this Vologodian hunter" (*Vserossiiskaia*, 1867: 51).

The catalogue of the Ethnographic Exhibition of 1867 contains the following description of this mannequin (this description was later represented *verbatim* along with an illustration image – Fig. 4. – in the album "Russian Peoples: sketches by pen and pencil" printed in 1894):

*Zyrian hunter (Vologda province, Ust-Sysolsk county). He wears zipun (coat) made of white cloth with mittens made of reindeer skin and attached to the sleeves of the coat. He also wears luzan (a kind of cape) made of the stripped Zyrian cloth and put on above the coat, black cloth trousers, knitted stockings, and lyzia kom – boots specially designed for skiing. He has a cloth cap on his head with attached parts protecting his ears and nape. An axe is attached to the luzan on his back. His belt and shoulder strap are equipped with a knife, a wooden gunpowder container, a gunpowder measure,*



Fig. 4. "Zyrian hunter (Vologda province, Ust-Sysolsk county)". (taken from: *Russkie narody*, 1894: 19)

*a screwdriver and two purses, one for bullets and the other for spare flints. He holds a flint rifle of the local production in his hands.*

*(Etnograficheskaya vystavka, 1878: 41; Russkie narody, 1894: 1].*

After the exhibition was closed, the "Zyrian Hunter" mannequin, which was made by the artist Ya. M. Yakovlev, was given to the department of ethnography, the Alexander III Museum of Russia (currently – Russian Ethnographic Museum, St-Petersburg). It was most probably this mannequin that was later exhibited at the World Exhibitions in Paris in 1878 and in 1900 (Burlykina, 2013; Sova, 2014).

It is worth noting that the similar image of Vologodian "Zyrian Hunter" (Fig. 5.) was re-printed in the coloured attachment to the "Russia" journal in 1890 (*Khudozhestvennyi albom*, 1890: 4).



Fig. 5. "Zyrian" (taken from: *Khudozhestvennyi albom*, 1890: 4).





Fig. 6. The postcard “Zirianines” from the set “Nations”. Published approx. in 1900 (Published by “Brocard and Co”, 2019).

## “ZYRIAN HUNTER” ON POST-CARDS OF THE 19<sup>th</sup> – EARLY 20<sup>th</sup> CENTURIES

Ethnographic images (mostly drawings) of Komi-Zyrians were present also on postcards (or “open letters” as they were named at that time) produced in Russia in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and in the first quarter of 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The first “open letter” with an image of a Komi hunter was printed in the late 1890s by “Brocard and Co”, a company belonging to the famous Russian perfume maker Genrich Afonasiyevich Brocard (Fig. 6.). It was a part of the “Nations” postcard set, which also included postcards titled “Russians”, “Turkmen”, “Samoyeds”, “Kalmyks”, “Tungus”, “Buryat”, “Yakuts”, “Kyrgyz”, “Caucasians”, “Kazaks”, and “Mordovians” (Zal “Brocard and Co”, 2019).

It can be supposed that this drawing of the Zyrian hunter copied the mannequin dressed in an authentic hunting costume of Komi exhibited during the Ethnographic Exhibition of 1867 in Moscow (Putevoditel, 1867: 33) and described in the previous part of this paper. It is interesting to compare this image to the modern ethnographic description of a luzan (the upper cape), which certainly represents the most distinctive part of the Komi hunting costume:

*On the inner side of a luzan, both its front and on its back, large pockets were made by attaching additional pieces of canvas. These pockets were used to store birds and animals (or animal pelts) killed during the hunting trip as well as some hunting equipment. A long belt was attached to the waist of the frontal part (laz morös) of a luzan; this belt warped around the back of the waist left to right and was locked on the right side of the body to keep front and back sides of the luzan together. Sometimes the belt was replaced by two pairs of ties on each side of the body. On the back side of a luzan,*

in its upper part, a belt loop (*laz kozian*) for hanging an axe was attached. Sides of a *luzan* were strengthened by leather ribbons. Many *luzans* also had small “wings” to cover shoulders of the hunter; those were made by attaching additional pieces of canvas to the shoulder part. On some *luzans* the shoulder, breast and back (under the axe loop) parts were additionally protected by attaching pieces of leather. Hunters wore *luzans* with leather belts (*tasma*) and shoulder straps put above it. Separate purses for storing gunpowder, caps, bullets as well as a gunpowder measure, a self-made compass and a knife were attached to them. (Kona-kov, 1983: 51–52).

The same image, this time titled “Zyrian Hunter of the Vologda Province” (Fig. 7.) was printed on one of the 9 postcards from the “Peoples of Russia” set issued by the Imperial Moscow and Rumiantsev Museum in 1914 (printed by the “Fast printing company” of A. Levenson). Besides a Komi-Zyrian, this set featured images of Mordovians, Kyrgyz, Finns, Kalmyks, Sarts, Yakuts, Gypsies, and Buryats.



Fig. 7. Postcard “Zyrian Hunter of the Vologda Province with His Hunting Tools”. Issued by the Imperial Moscow and Rumiantsev Museum, Dashkov’s ethnographic collection. Printed by the “Fast Printing Company” of A. A. Levinson, 1914.

The back side of the postcard contains the following information:

*Zyrians belong to the Uralic group of the eastern Finnish branch of peoples, together with Permyaks, Votyaks and Voguls. Their name comes from “zyr”, “zyria” (edge/margin), but they name themselves “Komi”, which means “human” in their language. They lead a settled way of life in settlements on the banks of rivers in the Vologda, Arkhangelsk and Perm provinces. Their number exceeds 155 thousands. They practice agriculture, cattle and reindeer husbandry, hunting, fishing, forestry, and fur trade. They were baptized in the mid-14<sup>th</sup> century by St. Stephen, the Bishop of Perm, who invented an alphabet for them, but some of their paganist false beliefs still hold strongly. They are quite russified in their way of life. The picture depicts a Zyrian hunter of the Vologda province with his hunting tools.*





Fig. 8. “Zyrian Hunter”. A postcard of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The exact date and place of publishing as well as the publisher and the artist are unknown.

The tool the depicted hunter holds in his hands is named *koi bed* in Komi and it serves a number of functions. Before the spread of rifles, *koi bed* was used as a spear for throwing. After the spread of firearms, the main function *koi bed* came to serve was that of a rifle support, a monopod on which a heavy flint rifle was placed while aiming and shooting. It was also used for setting hunting traps (they were set from the “spade” situated on the end of the *koi bed*), for digging snow, for cleaning ice before making a hole in it for winter fishing, etc. (Sergel, 2011: 130).

Unfortunately, the origin of the last postcard image of Zyrian hunter (the postcard “Zyrian Hunter”, Fig. 8. above) is unknown. One can only say that this postcard was probably issued after 1904: it has a special place for a postal address on its backside, something that appeared on Russian postcards only after the special demand by the International Postal Union issued in 1904 (Mozokhina, 2010: 327). The autograph of the artist is present in the lower right corner of the postcard, but all attempts to identify the artist by this autograph have so far failed (Sharapov, 2019).

A photocopy of this postcard is currently stored in the collection of the National Museum of the Komi Republic (*Okhotnichi tropy*, 2020: 8). Incidentally, the black and white copy of this postcard was used as an illustration to the article by V. A. Izhuroff in English titled “Peculiar life of Zyrians” and published in the USA in 1913 (Izhuroff, 1913: 278).

## THE PORCELAIN KOMI-ZYRIAN

In 1910, the image of Komi hunter became a part of the famous porcelain collection “Peoples of Russia” by Pavel Kamensky (Fig. 9.). This collection was produced by the Imperial Porcelain Factory in St.-Petersburg to commemorate the 300 year anniversary of the Imperial (Romanov) Dynasty (Khmelnitskaia, 2013: 106).

E. S. Khmelnitskaia, the researcher of P. P. Kamensky’s art, writes the following on this image:

*Among the models to be produced first was the image of a Zyrian, the inhabitant of the “spacious north-eastern part of the Vologda province and of the adjacent Mezen county of the Arkhangelsk province...” In accordance to K. A. Popov, “among our peoples, Zyrians are probably the least famous. Furthermore, their pace of movement to the complete russification is increasing <...> and every new day brings an increased risk of losing information about them forever”. However, it is still unknown what sources and blueprints were used to create the porcelain Zyrian. Indeed, the costume he features and particularly the “laz” (“löz”, “luzan”) cape with a hood that he wears, has not been found either in the collections of the Anthropology and Ethnography Museum or in those of the Russian Ethnographic Museum. (Khmelnitskaia, 2014: 550–551).*



Fig. 9. Komi-Zyrian hunter. An item from the “Peoples of Russia” porcelain collection by Pavel Kamensky. Produced by the Imperial Porcelain Factory in St. Petersburg to commemorate the 300 years anniversary of the Imperial Dynasty. The photo is taken from (Khmelnitskaia, 2013: 106) [http://www.komi.com/pole/files/1910\\_Komi\\_Zyrian\\_hunter\\_from\\_collection\\_of\\_Kamensky.jpg](http://www.komi.com/pole/files/1910_Komi_Zyrian_hunter_from_collection_of_Kamensky.jpg)

It is obvious, however, that it was the “Zyrian Hunter from the Vologda Province” that represented the most popular ethnographic image of Komi in both Russian and foreign publications of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

## THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE ETHNIC IMAGE OF KOMI-ZYRIANS BY FINNISH ETHNOGRAPHERS OF THE EARLY 20<sup>th</sup> CENTURY

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Finnish researchers were immersed into a great project of searching for the roots of the Finnish culture in the ancient historical, cultural and linguistic unity of Finno-Ugric peoples. In this comparative research project, great attention was paid to ethnographic data on the “Finno-Ugric relatives”, that is other people speaking Finno-Ugric languages, in order to create their authentic “ethnic portraits” to be later used in comparative studies. In this period, Finnish researchers start collecting ethnographic data on, among other things, traditional costumes of different local groups of Komi. While, by the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there were only a few isolated elements of Komi costume in Finnish museums, a surprisingly huge collection of Komi and Komi-Permian artifacts have been collected by Finnish linguists, folklorists and ethnographers already by the late 1900s. This collection was used for the exposition on Finno-Ugric peoples, which was opened in the National Museum of Finland in 1923. Most of the items in this collection were bought by Y. J. Vihman (1868-1932), A. Kannisto (1874-1943) and U. T. Sirelius (1872-1929) during their expeditions to the Vologda, Perm and Vyatka provinces as well as to the Ob river region in Western Siberia (populated, among others, by Komi migrants) in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Survo, 2014: 33–34).

Unfortunately, the rich collection of Komi clothes brought to Finland by U. T. Sierlius as the result of his “Permian expedition” of 1907 was not published during his life and has rarely been studied after his death. Only a few items from this collection were represented in the publication “Decorative handwork of Permian Women” by the Finnish art researcher T. Vahter (Vahter, 1949). This excellent book contains a valuable discussion of the costume of Letka Komi in comparison to that of Ladoga Karelians and Finno-Ugric peoples of the Volga Basin.

The “Permian expedition” by U. T. Sirelius has also greatly enriched the National Museums’ collection of photographs by adding a number of photos of Komi-Zyrians in their folk clothes. During his lengthy travel through the area populated by Komi, Sirelius made whole sets of photographic images of Komi-Zyrians belonging to different local groups. These photos feature festive, ceremonial and every-day costumes (Lehtonen, 1972: 74). The whole photographic collection brought by U. T. Sirelius from his travel of 1907 includes several dozens of negatives depicting Sysola, Vychegda and Letka Komi (*Museovirasto*, 1907; Zagrebina, Sharapov, 2008). Some of these photos were published in 1980 as a part of the famous ethnographic photo album “The Great Bear” (Lehtinen, 1980: 89–108).

However, even as late as in the late 1920s, the researchers of the Komi traditional culture still disagreed about distinguishing features of the “Komi folk costume”, while the drawn images of Zyrians constructed by the artists of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century continued to be re-printed and re-produced in both popular and academic publications about the history and culture of Komi people.

In 1929, the famous Finnish ethnographer I. Manninen made an interesting attempt to reconstruct an image of a Komi women dressed in a festive costume (Fig. 10.) on the basis of the diverse elements of Komi traditional clothes collected by U. T. Sirelius in Letka, Vychegda and Sysola basins in 1907 (Sirelius, 1907). In the monograph by I. Manninen about different Finno-Ugric peoples, the chapter on Zyrians is illustrated not only by ethnographic photos, but also by the author’s watercolour drawings representing this



ethnographic reconstruction of the image of a “real Zyrian woman” (Manninen, 1929: 272).

By the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the interest of Finnish researchers towards the history of folk costumes had developed into a project of detailed ethnographic study of traditional costumes of Russian Finno-Ugrians. This project was supported by the researchers’ belief that the “textile symbols” have a particular significance for the reconstruction of the most ancient periods of the “Finno-Ugric ethnic history”. At the same time, what Finnish ethnographers really searched for in the folk costumes and traditional decorative techniques were the distinguishing ethnic traits that would fit expectations and stereotypes of a Finnish audience. Therefore, the criteria they used for selecting ethnographic materials and artefacts for analysis and display in museum exhibitions were often ideological rather than scientific (Survo, 2007). This rather tendentious and nationalistically romantic perception of cultural heritage is reflected in the otherwise excellent treatise by T. Vahter already mentioned above. This book con-

tains the comparative historical analysis of the technological traditions of clothes decoration among Letka Komi, Komi-Permians and other peoples of European North.

It looks like the Finnish researchers, in their search for authentic “non-Russianness” and “Finno-Ugrianness”, not only studied in detail the ethnographic facts collected in the field, but also successfully constructed their own image of distinct and unique Komi culture. This image was based not only on the facts collected but also on the researchers’ beliefs of how a “real Finno-Ugric” culture should look like.



*Fig. 10. The reconstruction of the images of Letka and Sysola Komi women dressed in festive costumes by I. Manninen. This reconstruction has been made on the basis of fieldwork material and artefacts collected by U. T. Sirelius (Manninen, 1929: 272).*

## ETHNOGRAPHIC IMAGE OF KOMI IN THE SOVIET ETHNOGRAPHY

The Finnish approach to the study of Komi folk costume as described above was mostly shared by scholars in Russia throughout the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Indeed, the first Komi ethnographers – V. P. Nalimov, A. S. Sidorov, G. V. Shipunova, and others –



Fig. 11. One of the first booklets featuring different types of Komi folk costumes. It was printed in Syktyvkar by the publishing house of the Komi branch of the USSR Academy of Science in 1986. The artist was T. S. Kolchurina, at that time a research assistant at the laboratory for studying Komi arts and crafts, Institute of Language, Literature and History, Komi Branch of the USSR Academy of Science. The head of laboratory was L. S. Gribova (Tipy, 1986).

in their scientific research and museum work strictly followed the paradigm established by the Finns, whom they admired as their teachers and/or older colleagues. The systematic work on collecting ethnographic materials and artefacts related to the traditional clothes of Komi was started only in the late 1920s. By the end of this decade, collections of folk costumes of different Komi local groups form in the funds of the Komi Provincial Ethnographic and Historic Museum. However, just as in Finland, the aim of this work was not to describe and represent the ethnographic reality but rather to reconstruct some idealized “authentic”, “traditional” costumes of Komi men, women and children for each of the local groups: those of Vychegda, Sysola, Pechora, Vashka, Mezen and Letka Komi (Sharapov, 2013; Shipunova, 1931: 183).

At the same time, the famous Soviet ethnographer V. N. Belitser, who did regular fieldwork in the Komi ASSR between 1945 and 1952, wrote that:

*It is impossible to point out to full costumes, which could be related to particular local ethnographic groups of Komi. There are only particular elements of costume, which were used only by some groups of Komi or only on some territories populated by Komi.* (Belitser, 1958: 280)

Nevertheless, after L. P. Lashuk and L. N. Zherebtsov published their theoretical views about the possibility and usefulness of dividing Komi into several local ethnographic groups and mapping the distribution of cultural elements over the Komi area in the 1960s and 1970s, a new attempt was undertaken to reconstruct a “traditional” costume for each of the ethnographic groups Komi (Zherebtsov, Lashuk, 1960; Lashuk, 1960; Zherebtsov, 1974). The process of reconstructing (or, rather, constructing) “authentic” traditional folk costumes of Komi was started in the early 1970s and completed only in 1993, when the “Levana” art studio (headed by T. S. Kolchurina, see Fig. 11.) was organized by a group of ethnographers, designers and folk craftsmen. This studio specialized in producing “ethnic” costumes for folklore ensembles and theatres of the

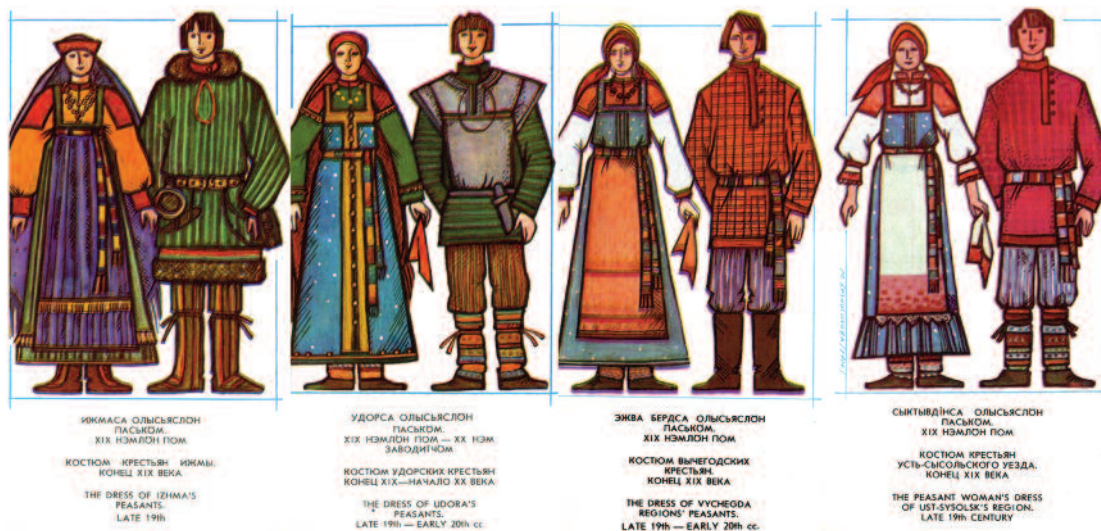


Fig. 12. Booklet “Komi Folk Costume”, artist – M. A. Beznosikova, 1998 (Narodnyi kostium, 1998).

Komi Republic and started advertising extremely stylized and stereotyped models of so called “folk costumes” of Vychegda, Sysola, Vym Luza, Udora and Izhma Komi.

These “basic models” designed by professional designers under the supervision of ethnographers in the late 1980s – early 1990s are still re-presented with variations in publications, in artistic workshops, sold in the form of “ethnic dolls” and studied by future designers and craftsmen in colleges and in the Syktyvkar State University (see Fig. 12.).

## VIRTUAL IMAGES OF KOMI-ZYRIANS

Currently the performance stages and souvenir shops of the Komi Republic are full of complete visual fakes, which are only distantly if at all related to the folk art and culture of the Komi people. The young generation of the so-called folk craftsmen of the Komi Republic are immersed in constructing their own “ethnic images”, which, in their opinion, could become more attractive “brands” and “trademarks” of the Republic in the growing market of tourist and souvenir products. Particularly among the so called “ethnic dolls”, one can more and more often see examples, which probably reflect “ethnic images” constructed by their authors for themselves, but have absolutely nothing to do with the local folk tradition (Chuviurov, 2018; Sharapov, 2020).

At the same time, thanks to the modern media technology, the ethnic image of “Zyrian hunter” is widely represented in the virtual space. The experiments with translating Komi ethnic culture by the means of animation based on folklore and mythological plots (Piankova, 2016) are of particular interest here. Closely related to them are experiments with creating virtual interactive museum spaces by the means of “virtualizing” the cultural heritage and “animating” ethnic images (Karm, Leete, 2015: 115). The authors of the novel international project on museum animation “Ethno-multi-promotion” write that “animations do not strive to achieve the 100% ethnographic correctness and leave enough space for artists to re-interpret the laconic



folklore texts recorded among Finno-Ugric peoples by different researchers of the late 19<sup>th</sup> – early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries”. The principal aim of the project is defined as “the translation of the traditional cultures by the means of artistic animation” (Bandura, 2018: 42-44; Bandura, Karm, 2019). For example, in order to design main characters for the animations “Chukla” (2012) and “Yirkap” (2016), which are based on Komi myths, the group of museum specialists, ethnographers and animation artists used photographs of Komi hunters made in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century as well as on the dozens of authentic museum artefacts and on ethnographic films depicting Komi hunting (Bandura, 2016).

It can be suggested that the trends towards the total “virtualization” of the tradition as well as towards the artistic animation of the ethnic images and symbols do not only signify the technical achievements of the modern museum technologies but also reflect the certain ambivalence of perceiving the “ethnic” and the “traditional” by the modern men, to the need of their re-coding (Survo & Survo, 2018: 222). The “ethnic” gadgets and widgets, where the artistic fantasy of their designer relate the real 8 thousand year old archaeological artefacts with Komi folklore plots making them magical attributes of a Komi hunter (Bandura, Karm, 2019: 14), hardly make their predominantly young users competent in the ethnic history of their land or critical about their own ethnic identity. I believe that such an artistic play with ethnic images and symbols is not particularly good for the translation of the authentic cultural heritage and for the presentation of the historically adequate “ethnic portraits” which the artists declare as their aim. It is interesting, that these are the images of “virtual Zyrians” that gain particular popularity and spread both inside and outside the Komi Republic. In my opinion, they are not dissimilar to the “drawn Zyrians” of the late 19<sup>th</sup> – early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. However, the changes in the methods of the ethnographic museum “re-production” undoubtedly create a need for the further theoretical analysis of the difference between presenting ethnicity and ethnic images in the cyberspace and presenting ethnic identity as an historical and cultural reality.

## CONCLUSIONS

The data and evidence presented and analysed in the previous paragraphs show that the leading role in the formation of visual tradition of presenting Komi-Zyrian identity has been played by the image of Zyrian hunter, which was first published in 1862 and, by the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, became a “canonic” ethnographic portrait of a Komi-Zyrian. It was re-printed with variations in many academic and non-academic publications of the late 19<sup>th</sup> – early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Our data has also demonstrated that both Russian and Western scholars, who were involved in constructing the ethnographic visual image of Komi Zyrians during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, followed the ideological practice of “searching for authentic finno-ugrism”: all the visual traits and artefacts, which could be associated with “others”, i.e. related to other, particularly Russian ethnic traditions, were consciously suppressed, pushed away from the visual field and/or marked as “insignificant texts” by other means. This ideological practice was common for both pre-Soviet and Soviet scholars, despite the fact that Soviet ethnographers took one step down on the “community scale”: their typology of folk costumes for different ethnographic groups of Komi aimed at constructing an authentic image not only for Komi-Zyrians as a whole, but for each local group of Zyrians by searching for specific details “immanent” for different “economic-cultural types”

present in the European North. This is particularly evident in the so-called “sarafan complex”, the female folk costume based on sarafan, which was common for the whole North of European Russia. Soviet ethnographers took a lot of effort to find elements of cut, decoration and way to wear these clothes, which could be claimed specific for particular local groups of Komi even though these specific “elements” could have a rather limited spread among the members of the group; in the cases these specific elements could not be found at all, they were “reconstructed” by different means. Interestingly, the classic image of Zyrian hunter created in the 19<sup>th</sup> century survived throughout the Soviet time and its elements can easily be found in modern visualizations and descriptions of the “traditional” Komi culture. Other versions of the traditional male costume of Komi presented nowadays in different popular books and booklets, except the fur clothes of Izhma Komi reindeer nomads, represent “artistic reconstructions” of modern ethnic designers and have little (most often even nothing) to do with historical ethnographic reality. This can be proven by the large collection of photographs made by Russian and Western researchers during their expeditions to the Komi area during the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and featuring representatives of different local groups of Komi. It is obvious that modern researchers and designers follow the same practice of searching for and, if necessary, “reconstructing” the “authentic image” of Komi as that followed by their predecessors in the pre-Soviet and Soviet times. In this context, it would be interesting to study the image of ethnic Komi-Zyrian and the traditional Komi costume that exists among representatives of ethnic groups living close to Komi and maintaining historical contacts with them. Thus it is a well-known fact that those groups of Komi, which live outside the core Komi area in places where other ethnic groups have always prevailed (i.e. Komi groups in the Nenets Autonomous Area, Yamal-Nenets and Khanty-Mansi Okrugs behind the Urals, Kola Peninsula) still keep rather clear ideas about and views on the “real Komi clothes” and its distinguishing traits.

It can look like a paradox, but leaders and activists of the modern ethnic and folklore movements in different regions of the Komi Republic rely on “scientific retrospective reconstructions” rather than on living ethnic tradition when they create and present publicly what they believe to be “authentic” images of Komi. This inevitably leads to the death of the tradition and to the elimination of technologies and techniques of making and using clothes, which still exist in different areas of the republic. The folk costume festivals and competitions regularly organized by the Komi Republican Chamber of Crafts are particularly indicative here: during these events, professional ethnographers, anthropologists and designers, who are supposed to be careful researchers and documenters of the living folk tradition, act as expert judges assessing the “authenticity” of the costumes presented, their conformity to the “canonic image of Komi-Zyrians”. In other words, they judge how much the living tradition presented to them is correct and “authentic”. It looks like the process we are observing now is one of transformation of the Komi folk costume from an element of living tradition into a visual symbol of ethnic regional identity. The obviously excessive decorative component of such modern folk costume, its “theatricality” and “scenery”, seems to stress its main function, the one of manifesting publicly its creator’s and/or user’s identity as a member of the Komi-speaking community and the community of the citizens of the Komi Republic. The author of this paper thinks that the modern public discourse about the unique traits of the ethnographic image of Komi-Zyrians represents an interesting topic of future anthropological research.

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- Fig. 1. "Zyrian woman. Votyak woman. Votyak man and Zyrian man." A lithograph by Vial. Taken from: Pauly Th. de. *Description ethnographique des Peuples de la Russie* / Par T. de Pauly. St.- Petersburg, 1862, pp. 20–21. [https://runivers.ru/upload/iblock/104/Pauli\\_F.H.\\_Etnograficheskoe\\_opisanie.pdf#page=295&zoom=auto,-201,632](https://runivers.ru/upload/iblock/104/Pauli_F.H._Etnograficheskoe_opisanie.pdf#page=295&zoom=auto,-201,632).
- Fig. 2. "Votyaks and Zyrians" as depicted in the "Peoples of Russia" album (taken from: *Narody Rossii*, 1878: 100).
- Fig. 3. "Zyrian is leaving for hunting". Taken from: Kari. *Suomensukuksia kansoja Venäjällä* // Suomen Kuvaletti. №61, Kesäkuuta, 1875. – S.153.
- Fig. 4. "Zyrian hunter (Vologda province, Ust-Sysolsk county)". (taken from: *Russkie narody*, 1894: 19).
- Fig. 5. "Zyrian" (taken from: *Khudozhestvennyi albom*, 1890: 4).
- Fig. 6. The postcard "Zirianines" from the set "Nations". Published approx. in 1900 (*Zal "Brocard & Co"*, 2019).
- Fig. 7. Postcard "Zyrian Hunter of the Vologda Province with His Hunting Tools". Issued by the Imperial Moscow and Rumiantsev Museum, Dashkov's ethnographic collection. Printed by the "Fast Printing Company" of A. A. Levinson, 1914.
- Fig. 8. "Zyrian Hunter". A postcard of the early 20th century. The exact date and place of publishing as well as the publisher and the artist are unknown.
- Fig. 9. Komi-Zyrian hunter. An item from the "Peoples of Russia" porcelain collection by Pavel Kamensky. Produced by the Imperial Porcelain Factory in St. Petersburg to commemorate the 300 years anniversary of the Imperial Dynasty. The photo is taken from (*Khmelnitskaia*, 2013: 106).

Fig. 10. The reconstruction of the images of Letka and Sysola Komi women dressed in festive costumes by I. Mannenen. This reconstruction has been made on the basis of fieldwork material and artefacts collected by U. T. Sirelius (Manninen, 1929: 272).

Fig. 11. One of the first booklets featuring different types of Komi folk costumes. It was printed in Syktyvkar by the publishing house of the Komi branch of the USSR Academy

of Science in 1986. The artist was T. S. Kolchurina, at that time a research assistant at the laboratory for studying Komi arts and crafts, Institute of Language, Literature and History, Komi Branch of the USSR Academy of Science. The head of laboratory was L. S. Gribova. (*Tipy*, 1986).

Fig. 12. Booklet “Komi Folk Costume”, artist – M. A. Beznosikova, 1998 (*Narodnyi kostium*, 1998).

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