

DOCTORAL DISSERTATION ON THE NEGOTIATIONS OVER “VEDIC” TRADITION IN RUSSIA

Irina Sadovina. *In Search of Vedic Wisdom: Forms of Alternative Spirituality in Contemporary Russia*. Dissertationes Folkloristicae Universitatis Tartuensis 28. University of Tartu Press, 2020. 223 pp.

Irina Sadovina defended her PhD dissertation at the Institute of Cultural Research, University of Tartu, on the 15th of June 2020. The supervisor of the thesis was Ülo Valk (University of Tartu, Estonia) and the opponent was Kaarina Aitamurto (University of Helsinki, Finland).

What kind of profiles would you expect to find in a Russian online dating site with a search word “Vedic”? The answer is: a gamut of different kinds of identities and people, ranging from Orthodox Christians and followers of Slavic Native Faith to an Indian man searching for a Russian wife. With this example of the fluidity and diversity of alternative spirituality in contemporary Russia, Irina Sadovina begins her engaging study of the various understandings of and negotiations over the concept of Vedic in contemporary Russian society and cultic milieu. As Sadovina demonstrates, the term “Vedic” is used as a self-identification by adherents of different Hindu traditions, various self-help therapists, adherents of contemporary Slavic Paganism, and such movements as the Ringing Cedars of Russia. The study proposes that instead of analysing a specific movement or the cultic milieu at large, drawing attention to the cross-section of spiritual discourses opens new perspectives to the negotiation of ideas as well as to the boundary-making between communities. For this kind of approach, the underresearched concept of Vedic wisdom in Russia offers an excellent case study.

The thesis is a doctoral dissertation by publication and consists of two parts. The first one is an extensive introduction to the study, which presents the research questions, materials, theories, and main arguments. It also binds the articles together and provides a context for them. The second one contains four research articles that have been or are about to be published in such journals as *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, *Nova Religio*, and *Digital Icons: Studies in Russian, Eurasian and Central European New Media*, as well as in the monograph *Contesting Authority: Vernacular Knowledge and Alternative Belief*. For the study of a cluster of religious movements or phenomena, a dissertation that is based on articles seems to be a particularly good form. The articles on spiritual consumerism and traditional authority at the Child of Nature Festival in Russia; on humour and resistance in the Anastasia Movement; on legitimating new religiosity and religious authority under attack; and on Putin memes in an online community of the Anastasia Movement make a balanced set in terms of both topics of research and theoretical approaches.

The material of this study was gathered in an extensive fieldwork in St. Petersburg, Yoshkar-Ola, and Pskov region. In addition, Sadovina made digital ethnography in social media, on websites and online communities of different groups. The material is very impressive and so is Sadovina’s discussion about the methodology and ethical concerns in ethnography. She takes very seriously such ethical issues as the power imbalance between the researcher and the people who are researched. She shows great reflexivity

and emphasizes that the interpretive work of people who she is studying must not be considered secondary to professional academic theory building. Sadovina draws on the concept of “humble theory” from folkloristics and the term “vernacular theory” or “vernacular theorizing”. The first one of these implies cautiousness toward grand theories and sensitivity to the empirical reality, whereas the latter challenges the division into academic theorizing and the meaning-making of people who are studied.

In terms of theory, the study is truly interdisciplinary, applying concepts and approaches from folklore, study of religion, media studies, and cultural theory, such as vernacular religion, the rise of non-institutional, individually constructed spirituality, the legitimization of religious authority, consumption and religion as well as the neo-liberal currents in religiosity. Again, the format of a thesis that consists of articles suites well to the richness of theoretical approaches, as each article is centred on one or a couple of theoretical concepts. However, together they create new links between different theoretical approaches. At the same time, the articles nicely illustrate how different theoretical lenses open complementing perspectives to the same movement.

Instead of authoritative texts and institutions, Sadovina focuses on vernacular religion, the way spirituality is lived, performed, and negotiated in everyday life.



As a state of emergency was declared in Estonia due to Covid-19, the defence procedure took place on Microsoft Teams. Left above Professor Art Leete, head of the Institute of Cultural Research, University of Tartu; right above Irina Sadovina; left below opponent Kaarina Aitamurto, University of Helsinki, Finland; right below supervisor of the thesis Ülo Valk, University of Tartu, Estonia. Screenshot by Piret Voolaid 2020.

This approach emphasizes the agency of individuals and challenges the power hierarchies in the divisions into the “official” and “folk” religions. In addition to the innovation and interpretative work of individuals, the concept of vernacular belief highlights the horizontal exchange of ideas and negotiations between people. Though Sadovina admits that despite of this horizontality, vernacular belief is not untouched by institutional codes and control, she correctly points out that focusing attention to it allows us to scrutinize the everyday creativity beyond the binary of power and resistance. For example, the article on Putin memes in an online community of the Anastasia Movement offers a refreshing outlook to the discussions about the image of Putin in Russian society by arguing that in this community, the president is neither celebrated nor criticized, but merely employed in the envisioning of a future that the community promotes.

It could be suggested that the focus on individual agency in the study also comes naturally due to the nature of alternative spirituality. Both modernity and globalization have produced the erosion of traditional forms of religious authority and this is particularly evident concerning alternative spirituality. Therefore, one of the main questions of the study is: How is spiritual authority legitimized in this landscape, and what enables divergent interpretations to be negotiated? In the article on the Child of Nature festival, Sadovina provides a nuanced analysis of the construction of individual spirituality and accommodating diversity in a cultic milieu. The article on a popular Russian lecturer of Vedic Wisdom, Oleg Torsunov, introduces an intriguing new theoretical concept of “the legitimation lattice”, which sheds new light on the resilience of religious authority when it is challenged or attacked. Sadovina argues that Torsunov’s ability to elude criticism derives from his ability to draw on several alternative sources of authority. He shifts between discourses of medicine, New Age, and popular psychology and uses different legitimation strategies to convince his audiences.

Sadovina concludes that Russian Vedic wisdom is part of the global landscape of beliefs, in which ideas travel, are borrowed, developed further and negotiated. Such global trends as neo-liberal ideas of work on self and the responsibility of an individual, as well as social media have significantly impacted Russian Vedic wisdom. At the same time, it reflects some societal and political currents in Russian society, such as the growing popularity of conservative values and nationalism. For example, in the article on Vedic wisdom “under fire”, she insightfully discusses how neo-liberal ideology is linked to the rhetoric on traditional femininity.

In recent decades religious freedom has deteriorated in Russian society. Nevertheless, as Sadovina argues and demonstrates, a vibrant cultic milieu still exists there. Insightfully, Sadovina identifies four strategies, which alternative religions may use in the face of the growing dominance of the Russian Orthodox Church and the restrictions to the freedom of religion: 1) humour, 2) ideological alignment with the status quo, 3) a flexible approach to legitimation, and 4) a shift from religious rhetoric to popular psychology.

One of the merits of this study is its discussions about humour and religion. This is the main topic of one of the articles, “Humour and Resistance in Russia’s Ecological Utopia (A Look at the Anastasia Movement)”, but the theme occurs in all the articles one way or the other. Sadovina demonstrates that the adherents of new religious movements use humour in numerous ways to, for example, respond to outside hostility, construct the identity, and negotiate the boundaries of their movement and accommodate

and reconcile different views. The study of religion and humour is an emerging field of enquiry and I believe that Sadovina's pioneering studies can be considered as a great contribution to it.

The dissertation is an invaluable contribution to the study of religion in Russia as well as to global studies of alternative spirituality. However, it also provides an original approach to the study of alternative spirituality, which is transferable to other contexts as well. Discussing the different groups and teachings of "Vedic wisdom" together allows Sadovina to examine the negotiations and borrowings between different groups, and the hybridization of discourses. This kind of approach draws attention to the dynamics in the field of spirituality instead of trying to form static portrayals of some movements or groupings. Moreover, it demonstrates that in this field the boundaries between communities and teachings are often fluid, under constant negotiation, and therefore always somewhat artificial constructs.

Kaarina Aitamurto