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Vedic Slavism in Slovakia: Ideology and Practice

TOMÁŠ KUBISA*

The Velvet Revolution in 1989 ended the existence of communist Czechoslovakia. Division of the state followed and two democratic entities – the Czech and the Slovak Republics – were formed. Censuses show that Slovakia gradually followed the general European trend of the decline of traditional Christian churches and, at the same time, also established an alternative spiritual milieu.¹

The current religious composition of Slovakia is as follows. Nearly 70 % adhere to various Christian denominations (the largest being Catholicism, which accounts for nearly 60 % of Christian believers, though this figure was 75,5 % in 2011, according to the census of that year). Other Abrahamic religions include Judaism (0,04 %) and Islam (0,1 %). What is surprising is that the largest non-Abrahamic religion is Buddhism (0,1 %); it is also the most numerous of the “alternative” religions in Slovakia, with more than 6 000 followers. Paganism² has 4 007 adherents (0,1 %).³

The movement of Slavic-Aryan Vedas, or Vedic Slavism, entered the religious market relatively late and forms the main line of thought of the Pagan discourse in Slovakia to that extent that it has been noticed by the Slovak mainstream majority.

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1 Zdeněk R. Nešpor, *Česká a slovenská religiozita po rozpadu společného státu: náboženství Dioskúrů*, Praha: Karolinum 2020.

2 The words Pagan and Paganism in the following text refer to contemporary Paganism (Slovak “Pohanstvo”, “Pohan” as a follower of this religion). Other “Pagans” e.g. Celts, will be specified in the text, as well as historical Paganism.

3 “Počet obyvateľov podľa náboženského vyznania v SR k 1. 1. 2021”, Sčítanie obyvateľov, domov a bytov 2021 [online], <<https://web.archive.org/web/20220120193943/https://www.scitanie.sk/obyvatelia/zakladne-vysledky/struktura-obyvatelstva-podla-nabozenskeho-vyznania/SR/SK0/SR>>; “Prehľad konfesionality obyvateľstva obcí Slovenska v sčítaniach 1869-2011” [online], Slovak archive of social data, <http://sasd.sav.sk/sk/data_katalog_abs.php?id=sasd_2011002>, [2 February 2023].



Movement of Slavic-Aryan Vedas, or the older name Ynglings (official name: Ancient Ynglist, Church of the Old Believers – Ynglings), began to appear in Slovakia after the year 2000 and reached wider public attention after 2005 through the website www.tartaria.sk.

The core of teachings of groups associated with this movement are Pagan, although it seeks to operate as a state-registered church in the Russian Federation. Ynglism⁴ draws from various religious currents and, in addition, elements of esoteric teachings can be found in it, as well as elements from the dharmic religions. The movement presents itself as the original religion of the Indo-European nations. In Slovakia, this movement acts as a civic association. I will describe the phenomenon of Slavic-Aryan Vedas in Slovakia and analyze the group's ideology and practices in the context of the Slovak religious landscape.

In my field research (carried out between 2018 and 2021), I approached this new religious movement through qualitative ethnography. I attempted to accurately detect the social processes that led to the emergence of this religious/spiritual movement, but also the internal elements that create its dynamism and fluidity.

Research methods

Participant observation was the dominant anthropological method used, this consisting of the direct participation of the author in the life of the researched community and the collection of ethnographic data. Specifically, this personal participation involved participation in naturally occurring cultural phenomena, social situations, rituals and ceremonies.⁵ Although this method is generally accepted, it has its pitfalls. My main concern was whether my presence would have a disturbing effect on others, i.e. whether it would not contaminate the environment to such an extent that it would invalidate the observed practice. Fortunately, based on my observation, this did not happen. For example, participants were not distracted by my presence and several participants later described “mystical experiences” during the spiritual exercises, so I conclude that my company did not disturb the research environment.

I attended four public ceremonies and three weekend seminars held by these groups and open to the general public. On each research visit, I behaved like a regular visitor, though it was not covert research. Before the

4 The correct transcription is a subject of debate. I prefer the term Ynglism when referring to religious ideology in Russia and the term Inglistism when referring to a specific group or “church”.

5 Martin Soukup, *Terénní výzkum v sociální a kulturní antropologii*, Praha: Karolinum 2014, 93.

event, I contacted the organizer and explained my intention and the research goal. Participatory observation alone would not have been enough to understand the function of these groups so it was also combined with the method of autoethnography.⁶

I submitted to the norms of the community and internally committed myself during the research to follow their practice, except in situations that would be against the law. Though the organizers were aware of my academic intentions, I was nevertheless accepted, and I participated in rituals and spiritual exercises.

In practice, my research followed this plan: I found events organized by the group on the Internet and signed up as a participant (lecture festival 2018 Zvolen). Since successful economic activity is also important for these groups, there were no other entry criteria apart from the entrance fee. This event served to select the next course of action. It was already noticed here that the membership was relatively free (no initiation or registration was necessary) and that “commandments” in the Slavic-Aryan Vedas are not strictly implemented (e.g. prescribed clothing). Weekend seminars in Liptovský Mikuláš and Bratislava (November 2019), in which I was also a participant and underwent all the spiritual exercises, brought substantial data concerning this anthropocentric group and the esoteric components of the teachings. I realized that it was not a unified group when there was an announcement about the celebration at Zobor in Nitra, on the occasion of the Winter Day of Perun (13 January 2020). The participants not only highlighted the ritual (they described esotericism and meditation as secondary), but also expressed certain reservations about anthropocentrism. I actively participated in ceremonies and recorded my observations in a research journal after the ceremonies, so as not to disturb the atmosphere and the participants.

I followed the methods described by Brenda Seligman, noting down everything that an anthropologist would consider important and then developing these notes into fuller records.⁷ In autoethnography, so-called headnotes (memory records from research that influence the researcher’s interpretation of the data), defined by the American anthropologist Simon Ottenberg, were used. These records “ripen” in the researcher’s head as they delve deeper into their research.⁸

6 Heewon Chang, *Autoethnography as method*, Walnut Creek (CA): Left Coast Press 2008.

7 Brenda Seligman, *Notes and queries on anthropology*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul 1951, 45.

8 Simon Ottenberg, “Thirty Years of Fieldnotes: Changing Relationships to the Text”, in: Roger Sanjek (ed.), *Fieldnotes*, Ithaca (NY): Cornell University Press 1993, 139-160.

The autoethnographic method thus gave me a perspective on how Vedic Slavism operates on a personal level. I will try to be as impartial and descriptive as possible, but due to my strong immersion in these groups, I may not avoid generalizing myself and the group in some places of the text. The main communication medium of these groups is the Internet, and for this reason, it was necessary to include online ethnography in the research methods. Online ethnography in its basic meaning is ethnographic research of an online community,⁹ though the offline life of these communities is equally important,¹⁰ therefore, online ethnography should always be combined with field ethnography.

Theoretical framework

After the fall of the communist regime, Slovakia experienced Western-style modernization, westernization. This brought detraditionalization, but also another new phenomenon – religious freedom and religious pluralism.¹¹

New religious movements and alternative elements can be completely non-Christian, or at least not following the official doctrine of the church (e.g. imports – dharma). The presence of such ideas is an outcome of detraditionalization combined with religious pluralism, or even individualization. Data from the 2008 International Social Survey Program (ISSP) for Slovakia show the increasing individualization and privatization of religion.¹²

Individualization is one of the key principles of modernity which places the individual at the centre of events. The possibility of choice is essential, but because an individual chooses from several options, the general validity of each option is reduced and none of them has a monopoly anymore. This leads to a reduction in the importance of traditions and their bearers and also a decrease in their attractiveness; thus, more individualized forms of piety gain popularity.¹³ Paganism can be one of the results.

9 Robert V. Kozinets, “On Netnography: Initial Reflections on Consumer Research Investigations of Cyberculture”, *Advances in Consumer Research* 25/1, 1998, 366-371.

10 Annette Markham, “The methods, politics, and ethics of representation in online ethnography”, in: Norman K. Denzin – Yvonna S. Lincoln (eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, Thousand Oaks (CA): SAGE 2005.

11 Tatiana Podolinská, “The Religious Landscape in Post-communist Slovakia”, *Anthropological Journal of European Cultures* 19/1, 2010, 85-101.

12 Tatiana Podolinská – Vladimír Krivý – Miloslav Bahna, “Religiozita: Slovensko a jeho susedia”, in: Vladimír Krivý (ed.), *Ako sa mení slovenská spoločnosť*, Bratislava: Sociologický Ústav SAV 2013, 239.

13 Dušan Lužný – David Václavík, *Individualizace náboženství a identita: poznámky k současné sociologii náboženství*, Praha: Malvern 2010, 29-30.

Individualization can also manifest itself in the inability to find solutions to problems (or resignation), which can escalate into religious politicization, or radical forms of rhetoric or violence,¹⁴ which, as the research examples below show, may be the case of Vedic Slavism.

Late modernity (the turn of the 21st century) is characterized not only by a significant degree of individualization but also by the fear of too much responsibility placed on the individual. After the secularization phase, so-called desecularization follows, because global society faces global forms of threat.¹⁵ José Casanova talks about the deprivatization of religion in the late modern period, which manifests itself as an attempt to reassert religious influence in the political and economic spheres.¹⁶

D. Pollack divides religiosity into traditional and non-traditional forms, and defines the traditional form as that which is realized within the church, with visible indicators e.g. church membership.¹⁷

Such a division is prescriptive, but it is still valid in Slovakia – perhaps in mainly rural areas; traditional religiosity is what is perceived as traditional (standard) and what the community sees (e.g. the attendance of religious services). Of course, there are also shifts over time. According to the 2021 census, the most numerous non-Abrahamic religion was Buddhism, which was in the census of 2011, similar to Paganism, not even listed.

Tradition and alternative sometimes overlap, instead of looking for an “alternative” to traditional religiosity, we can talk about accepting an “alternative” within traditional religiosity. On the individual level, this can be seen as the detraditionalization or even individualization of religiosity.¹⁸

According to some theorists, a characteristic phenomenon is “resacralization” accompanied by religious revivalism, deprivatization, and an increase in non-traditional forms of spirituality (in Europe).¹⁹

As I will show in the research examples, nowadays this process is present again, but on a detraditionalized individual basis. The Pagan scene in

14 *Ibid.*

15 Peter Ludwig Berger, *Vzdálená sláva*, Brno: Barrister and Principal 1997.

16 José Casanova, *Public religions in the modern world*, Chicago (IL): University of Chicago Press 1994, 211-234. Vedic Slavism is trying to establish its influence in various spheres of society. The sociologists Zdeněk Nešpor and Dušan Lužný point out that the introduction of religion into the public space outside of democratic principles can lead to violence. Zdeněk R. Nešpor – Dušan Lužný, *Sociologie náboženství*, Praha: Portál 2007, 143-144.

17 Detlef Pollack, “Religiousness Inside and Outside the Church in Selected Post-Communist Countries of Central and Eastern Europe”, *Social Compass* 50/3, 2003, 321-334.

18 Tatiana Zachar Podolinská – Miroslav Tížik – Juraj Majo, “Religiosity in Slovakia: Structure, Dynamics and Spatial Diversification”, *Central European Journal for Contemporary Religion* 3/1, 2020, 1-33.

19 T. Podolinská – V. Krivý – M. Bahna, “Religiozita: Slovensko...”, 85.

Slovakia itself is relatively small but dynamically changing. The most famous of the presently active Pagan groups in Slovakia is the Rodný Kruh group organized around the leader Žiarislav. Other groups were also formed, but they are no longer active, e.g. Perun's circle (Perúnov kruh).²⁰

These active groups belong to the so-called reconstructionists, who more or less stick to the historical sources upon which they reconstruct the original Pagan belief, although even they sometimes do not avoid the application of esoteric or New Age elements. In addition to the Rodný Kruh, other currently active groups include Priestesses Živena, who combine Slavic Paganism with spiritual feminism. Larger Germanic, Celtic, or Wicca groups are absent.²¹

Vedic Slavism is part of the Pagan scene. The basis of their teachings comes from Slavic mythology, but it is greatly enriched and modified, still, the Pagan discourse is dominant.

For better analysis, many researchers divide the studied phenomena into so-called dimensions. Their number varies (2 to 4) according to the focus of the research. For example, Grace Davie used two dimensions – faith and membership;²² in psychological approaches to religion – for example, that used by Vassilis Saroglou – four dimensions are used: belief, bond, behavior, and membership.²³ Pollack identifies indicators with the dimensions of religiosity and distinguishes three: religious membership, practice, and belief.²⁴ I also followed these dimensions/indicators during my research.

Many new religious movements (with claimed magical or esoteric traditions) can be included under the umbrella of the so-called New Age (from now on, only NA). NA offers a “spiritually self-custom-made” approach to spiritual seekers and is a major provider of spiritual services and products.²⁵ NA itself is a problematic category. It was very often used in the past as a huge generalised category, but is problematized by current schol-

20 Michal Puchovský, “Stará Viera v Novom Kroji – Moderné Pohanstvo Na Slovensku”, *Dingir* 2/2021, 25.

21 *Ibid.*, 26.

22 Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain since 1945: believing without belonging*, Oxford, Cambridge: Mass Blackwell 1994.

23 Vassilis Saroglou, “Believing, Bonding, Behaving, and Belonging: The Big Four Religious Dimensions and Cultural Variation”, *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 42/8, 2011, 1320-1340.

24 Detlef Pollack, “Religious Change in Europe: Theoretical Considerations and Empirical Findings”, *Social Compass* 55/2, 2008, 168-186.

25 Paul Heelas, “Prosperity and the New Age Movement: The Efficacy of Spiritual Economies,” in: Bryan Wilson – Jamie Cresswell (eds.), *New Religious Movements: Challenge and Response*, London – New York: Routledge 2001.

ars.²⁶ The relationship between NA and Paganism is subject to debate. Kaarina Aitamurto states that the two concepts must be distinguished.²⁷ Wouter Haanegraff also inclines to separate these phenomena, but he considers Paganism as a movement or a subculture within NA.²⁸

Origins and sources of Vedic Slavism

The origins of these teachings must be sought in the USSR in the 60s, when the Book of Veles was published. The writer Alexander Asov (pen name Bus Kresen) added the epithet “Slavic Vedas”. The connection with oriental spirituality occurred already in the 1970s and 80s when these teachings were popular among the Soviet intelligentsia. Although Buddhism and Hinduism are considered cultural imports in Western Europe and North America, some Russians consider them to be “semi-native”.²⁹

Many Rodnovers were originally involved in oriental spirituality before Rodnoverly e.g. the founder of the Veles circle, Veleslav, practised Agni yoga; the Vedist representative Alexey Trekhlebov (Vedagor) claims to have been initiated by a lama in Tibet, who advised him to seek his domestic tradition.³⁰

Even the founder, Pater Diy, himself started his activity during this wave of interest in Eastern and alternative spirituality. He graduated from the Omsk Polytechnic Institute and educated himself in psychology, hypnosis, and parapsychology. In the 1980s, he lectured on esotericism and dealt with Russian folk medicine.³¹ In 1991, he founded his center for the study of paranormal phenomena, Dzhiva: “Initially, he concentrated on the early German chronicles, mainly the Island sagas, where he picked up the

26 See e.g. Heelas, who noted that the New Age was so vast and diverse that a researcher on the subject could not hope to keep up with it. Paul Heelas, *Spiritualities of life: new age Romanticism and consumptive capitalism*, Malden (MA): Blackwell Pub 2008.

27 Kaarina Aitamurto, *Paganism, traditionalism, nationalism: narratives of Russian rodnoverie*, London – New York: Routledge Taylor Francis Group 2016, 62.

28 Wouter J. Haanegraff, “New Age religion and Western culture: esotericism in the mirror of secular thought”, Leiden – New York: E. J. Brill 1996, 79.

29 Vladimir Prokofyev – Sergei Filatov – Anastasyia Koskello, “Slavyanskoe i skandinavskoe yazychestvo. Vikkanstvo”, in: Michael Bordeaux – Sergei Filatov (eds.), *Sovremennaiia religioznaia zhizn’ Rossii: opyt sistematicheskogo opisaniia*, Moscow: Keston Institute 2006, 155-207.

30 K. Aitamurto, *Paganism, traditionalism...*, 25.

31 Viktor Shnirelman, “How to Become the ‘Slavic-Aryans’: The Founders of the Russian Neo-Paganism and Their Ambitions”, in: Alexandra Cotofana – James Nyce (eds.), *Religion and Magic in Socialist and Post-Socialist Contexts II Baltic, Eastern European, and Post-USSR Case Studies*, Stuttgart: Ibidem Press 2017, 89.

term ‘Inglings’. Later he turned to esotericism and developed an original teaching based on a syncretic Slavic-Aryan myth. He also included Indian sources.”³²

The teaching of this temple involved a mixture of gods, including Slavic, Germanic, Iranian and Indian ones, together with the idea of reincarnation and esotericism, and the idea of the struggle between Light and Darkness from Zoroastrianism and Christianity.³³ He presented the swastika as a symbol of the defence of the “holy faith and the earth”. Later he published these ideas in books, which became known under the collective name “Slavic-Aryan Vedas”.³⁴

These ideas were introduced to Slovakia by the writer Vladimír Laubert (pen name Lodomír). His career as a theoretician and ideologist of Vedic Slavism began in 2016 when he co-authored the book *Jakutské Oloncho* (Yaakutian Oloncho): an introduction to the Yakut mythical epic and “from his travels to Russia, he brought volumes of books of the Slavic-Aryan Vedas; he has been translating these books and organizing lectures, courses on the Old Slavic writing system Bukvica”.³⁵

In Slovakia, this movement acts as a civil association; it does not have a fixed structure and is rather a loose association of sympathizers. Its activities are currently directed more towards missionary activities, and the organization of lectures and seminars. The very name of the movement is also problematic because until now there is no “officially codified” name for this community.

Combining Vedic wisdom and Slavism is not a new phenomenon, and especially in Russia, there is a mixing of these elements at NA festivals.³⁶ This mixing is quite common in Russian spiritual circles and resulted in the term “Vedrussian.”³⁷ Vedic Slavism in Slovakia is constantly changing and forming (even splitting) and is largely dependent on Russian “imports”, whether in the form of textual materials, ideas, or spiritual teachers.

32 Viktor Shnirelman, “Obsessed with Culture: The Cultural Impetus of Russian Neopagans”, in: Kathryn Rountree (ed.), *Cosmopolitanism, Nationalism, and Modern Paganism*, New York (NY): Palgrave Macmillan 2017, 97.

33 *Ibid.*, 98.

34 V. Shnirelman, “How to Become...”, 89-90.

35 Vladimír Štollmann, *Jakutské Oloncho: Úvod do jakutského mýtického eposu a poznanie národa sachy*, B.m.: Vladimír Štollman 2016.

36 Irina Sadovina, “The New Age paradox: spiritual consumerism and traditional authority at the Child of Nature festival in Russia”, *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 32/1, 2017, 83-103.

37 Irina Sadovina, *In Search of Vedic Wisdom: Forms of Alternative Spirituality in Contemporary Russia*, [PhD Thesis], The Institute of Cultural Research, University of Tartu 2020, 68.

The Zhiva-yarga group is a different case. This group has Ukrainian origins and its parent organization is called Ancestral fire. One of the basic principles is relatively liberal pan-Slavism, which allows this group to expand into other Slavic countries and beyond. Groups linked to Ancestral fire exist in Russia, Serbia, Slovakia, Belarus, the Czechia, Bulgaria, Poland, Moldova and Germany. The original idea of this organization (1999) was based on the idea of Cossack sorcerers; followers studied martial arts and magic. In terms of organization, these foreign groups are managed very loosely, with occasional visits from the founder, Vladimir Kurovski. This type of spirituality is subject to criticism, the most common objections being that it is not an original Ukrainian spiritual tradition and also that it focuses on commercial activity, which resulted in the nickname ‘spiritual merchants’.³⁸

To present a detailed description of Slavic-Aryan Vedas is beyond the scope of the article, so I will just list a brief summary:

The Book of Wisdom of Perun – The book contains a transcription of the so-called “santias” – metal tablets that convey ancient knowledge. The book is written in poetic form as a dialogue with the god Perun, who talks about other races and the struggle between good and evil. Some of the passages are “dotted out” with the explanation that they cannot be published yet. Part of the book has the character of a prophecy – the discovery of the high priest and priestess, who are currently identified as Pater Diy and the vedma Nadezhda.

The Book of Light – The book describes the creation of life, the struggle between good and evil and the path of spiritual ascent. Part of the book was not published.

Word of wisdom Volchv Velimudr – The book focuses on the impact of historical events. The perfection of the Slavs is described, including how dark forces are trying to destroy it. A significant part deals with the symbolism of the swastika.

Confirmation of the Book of Light – It has an educational character in the form of essays. As confirmation of the authenticity of the Book of Light, various “inconvenient artifacts” and archaeological finds are cited that allegedly confirm the teachings.

Slavyanstvo – It is the most voluminous publication and is a cultural manual. It also contains the so-called *zapovede* (commandments) of gods and their patronages; prayers (*pravslaveniye*); advice on social organi-

³⁸ Kaarina Aitamurto – Mariya Lesiv, “The Return of Ancestral Gods: Modern Ukrainian Paganism as an Alternative Vision for a Nation”, *East/West: Journal of Ukrainian Studies* 17/2, 2015, 56-57.

zation; information on clothing and symbolism, ceremonial regulations, and sketches for the construction of temples.

Ethnography of Vedic Slavism

Originally, the teachings were imported from Russia to Slovakia. Over time, a group with a working title emerged from this teaching: Slavyanstvo – Anthropocentric Vedic Slavism. Over time, a less radical group with the working title Slavyanstvo – Theocentric Vedic Slavism separated from this group. The Zhiva – yarga group is also present in Slovakia; however, it was not formed by splitting, but rather imported separately from Ukraine.

The group's names are not generally accepted; they are analytical terms that allow individual groups to be distinguished from each other. The group of Anthropocentric Vedic Slavism represents the original line of thought brought to Slovakia by Lodomír from the Asgard spiritual school in Omsk, and published online. Lodomír later deviated from the original teachings and began to organize courses and seminars with the help of vedma (wise woman/witch), focused on esoteric teachings and human spiritual development. Thus, Anthropocentric Vedic Slavism was formed. The focus of this group is on the Caucasian race and their spiritual potential, on which they must work in order to attain the spiritual level above the level of the Gods. A sufficient number of these individuals can accelerate the arrival of the golden age of Slavs. This is the reason why this group has abandoned worship of the gods.

Pan-Slavic nationalism, Russophilia, and conspiracy theories are strongly present in this group. Organizationally, this group is covered by the civic association Tartaria (website tartaria.sk). The main activity of the group is running self-help (human potential development movement) seminars, which are unique within the Pagan scene. Participants receive knowledge (*znaniye*) and methodology, but everyone has to work with these tools individually if they want to reach the level of the “Golden Age”. These seminars are divided into two types: “beginner” and “large”. These seminars have not only an educational purpose but also a spiritual one. The main religious service is meditation. The anthropocentric group considers women to be spiritually superior to men. This group is the most influential and radical; although they reject physical violence, they practice a spiritual kind – cursing. This group also organizes courses that are focused on so-called ancient writing systems – *Bukvica*. Most sympathizers of this group can be found in central and eastern Slovakia.

The structure of the meditation remains the same, only the purpose and the “magic words” used change. At the beginning of the meditation, the vedma determines which “magic words” the participants will work with.

The first meditation uses the affirmation “AS YESM”.³⁹ Participants are invited to write this word twice and then the formula: “I know I renounce and free myself from all the negatives that are in me around me and also from all the causes of consequences and phantom creations called and also not called negatives. Here and now, always and everywhere, let it be. That’s the way it is, that’s the way it will always be. This is my holy will. Let it be.” Participants are independently asked to list all their “fears”, personal and general. The listing continues by writing “sins” the participants have ever committed, or the participants blame themselves for. Thus, listing these sins and fears is a kind of inner confession (psychohygiene) that is supposed to cleanse the participants.

The meditation is led by the vedma; it takes place in silence and no body position or breathing pattern is prescribed. The vedma sits in front of the participants at the table with closed eyes, occasionally reciting mantras (“magic words” – *Om-de-haar, chistkaar*) and repeating, from which the participants are purified (the curse, Muslim, Jewish magic, etc.). However, these words are used only by the vedma and their meaning is not explained to the participants. The meditation lasts about 30 minutes, after which participants are asked to burn the paper they have written on because fire is seen as a cleansing force, and at the same time “starts the program” created during the meditation: “By burning the paper, the circle closes and you feel light. And when you burn it, you get another boost.”⁴⁰

In this way, besides achieving spiritual purification, the participants can also attack enemies, and purify and magically affect the environment. For example, the magic attack is formulated as follows: “*Bereiginya*⁴¹ yesm (women) Svarga⁴² yesm (men), bereiginya yesm, I know, I curse and destroy all my enemies, all those who curse and destroy me and everyone who is in my obereg circle. For that is my higher will, of Mokosh,⁴³ for that is my higher will of the mother.”⁴⁴ Each participant lists separately what

39 In the meaning “I am As” thus I am god. Clearly a Scandinavian–pagan influence.

40 Ladomir, Liptovský Mikuláš, 17. 11. 2019, author’s field research.

41 Bereiginya – a being worshiped especially among Eastern Slavs. It is not entirely clear whether it was a demonic water creature similar to fairies, or a divine being such as the goddess Mokoš (Nada Profantová – Martin Profant, *Encyklopedie slovanských bohů a mýtů*, Praha: Libri 2007, 47). In the discourse of the HSAV, the protective aspect of this being stands out, and the title Bereiginya is used by initiated women who are actively engaged in spiritual work.

42 The word “svar” denotes paradise, but also heaven, brightness, radiance, or spiritual enlightenment. In Hindu mythology, it is Indra’s heaven on Mount Meru, where beings live in bliss and are reborn when their karmic merits are exhausted. Karel Werner, *Encyklopedie Hinduismu*, Bratislava: CAD Press 2008.

43 The goddess is worshiped especially by Eastern Slavs, probably the personification of the mother earth and fertility (N. Profantová – M. Profant, *Encyklopedie...*, 136).

44 Vedma Nadezhda, Liptovský Mikuláš, 18. 11. 2019, author’s field research.

(or who) she/he wished to die under this curse. Again, the curse is activated by burning the paper.

Theocentric Vedic Slavism was formed by splitting from the original anthropocentric group, due to its increasing radicalism. Accurate dating is not possible because it was not a sudden split, but a gradual shift from a radical esoteric line to “cultural Slavism”. In a sense, this group most closely resembles its Russian parent organization and seeks to implement this “Paganism of the Russian type” in Slovakia, but has no ambition to call itself a “church”. The dominant elements in this group are respect for the gods, spiritual work for oneself (study) and the education of others. Rituals are a central element in this group, while meditation has a private status. This group has a strong tendency towards ethno religiosity, which means ethnic and religious elements are inseparable. This is seen, for example, during rituals, where the national flag of the Slovak republic takes the place of an idol of the deity, and folk and hymnic songs are perceived as religious hymns and mantras. The supreme goal of this group is also the “golden age” of Slavs, but not through spiritual means – rather, through the education of people and implementation of the ideal way of life. Most of the supporters of this group come from western Slovakia (mostly Nitra) and the ceremonies usually take place in one of the forests in this part of the country. A popular ceremonial place is the hill Zobor, on the site of a former Slavic fortified settlement. Ritual places with special *genius loci* are considered the best, because it is possible to communicate with the spirits of ancestors; thus, they choose archaeological sites or places in their vicinity.

The ritual space is not permanent; it is always prepared “ad hoc”. The individual elements vary according to the holiday, but the central element is always the sacrificial fire (“living fire”). The fire is always lit by a flint and birch bark; matches and chemicals are forbidden. This is a key condition for it to be called “living”. In the case of bad weather, participants bring the firewood with them. When ignited, the fire is consecrated by a simple chant *pravslavenye* (opening formula): “From the living fire to the living fire!”.

An essential element of the ceremony (but also of the whole feast and ritual) is also the altar or sacrificial stone on which the offerings are placed. Herbs, grains, cakes, or other dishes can serve as a sacrifice to ancestors and gods, but never alcohol or meat dishes; a blood sacrifice is excluded. Theocentric Slavism does not involve the presence of wooden idols (*kummiry*) of gods as a feature of the ritual place. During ceremonies, a flag is stuck in the ground next to the altar. The flag can have a symbol such as the star of Perun; alternatively, the national flag of Slovakia can be

used. Round dances (*chorovody*)⁴⁵ are then performed around the flag and anthems are sung. The dance takes place in such a way that the participants hold hands and move around the whole ceremonial place together several times, singling hymnic or folk songs. During the solstice ceremony (Feast of *Kupala*), a specific symbolic dance is danced when two circles are formed (by holding hands), the inner one made up of women, and the outer one made up of men. The acolyte⁴⁶ explained that it is a symbolic expression of society, where women are inside, keeping a home fireplace, and men are outside like a wall protecting their family.⁴⁷

The offerings are then sanctified by laying hands on them; or individual consecration is also possible, by placing the offering on the individual's chest. The acolyte then throws them into the fire, inviting participants to ask their ancestors and gods (in their thoughts) what they (the participants) need or want to come true. One of the rituals that I had the opportunity to observe (and take part in) on the feast of *Kupala* on 7 July 2020 continued with the participants jumping over the fire nine times (the sacred number of Vedic Slavism) as a symbol of the purification of one's body and spirit. Before the jump, every participant praised one of the gods – for example: *Sláva Mokoši*⁴⁸ (*Glory to Mokosh!*). Other participants replied: *Večná sláva* (Eternal glory!).⁴⁹

There were two fires, larger for men and smaller for women.⁵⁰ The fires were next to each other. After each jump, each participant walked a few steps barefoot to a small pond (artificially excavated) and wet his/her feet. The Acolyte explained (before the ceremony) that in this way we make contact with the four elements: breathing and singing – air; jumping – fire; walking barefoot – earth; and soaking the feet – water.⁵¹

45 Chorovody – a group of collective, form-diverse speeches, synthesizing singing, simple dance movement and often even play, often associated with calendar customs. Ján Botík – Katarína Apáthyová-Rusnáková – Peter Slavkovský, *Encyklopédia ľudovej kultúry Slovenska I*, Bratislava: Veda 1995, 198.

46 The acolyte is the leader of the rituals; this position comes from the natural authority in the group, and no religious hierarchy is applied.

47 Author's field research, Nitra, 13. 1. 2020.

48 The Vedic gods such as Agni, Indra, Varuna and others mentioned in the book of Slavic Aryan Vedas are never called upon or praised during the ritual – only Slavic gods and goddesses, such as Perun, Mokoš, Lada, Stribog, Koliada etc. This is because the theocentric group tries to distance itself to a certain extent from Vedism and esotericism and emphasize rather Slavic elements.

49 Author's field research, Nitra, 7. 7. 2020.

50 This group perceives women as more vulnerable, those that men must protect, which is also reflected in the ritual space. The anthropocentric group, on the other hand, perceives women as spiritually stronger and female cursing as the strongest weapon.

51 Author's field research, Nitra, 7. 7. 2020.

The fire, the jumping, the sacrifice, chorovody, and the vocal side (praising, opening formulas) occurred in all the group ceremonies I attended. Inspiration by sacred texts in Slavic Vedas is obvious, but the exact construction of ceremonies and the sequence of individual elements is very loose and depends on the number of participants, the location, the weather, and other factors. Walking on embers can also be added as a means of spiritual purification, but in reality, this ceremony is not used due to the risk of fire, especially during the summer months.

The Zhiva-yarga group is a separate branch, the provenance of which is Ukrainian and not Russian. Its presence in Slovakia is difficult to date accurately; the books of the founder and leader, Vladímír Kurovski, were published in 2015, and sporadic seminars were held earlier. The website⁵² was not established until 2019. I dealt with the ethnography of this branch only marginally, as its presence in Slovakia is more than sporadic and it does not even create organized groups, nor has it any religious hierarchy (like the Ukrainian founding organization – Ancestral fire). The central element of this group is the so-called *celitelstvo*, or Slavic art of healing. It focuses mainly on healing by spiritual (magical) means, although there are also quasi-religious/modern alternative elements (e.g., yoga, called *yarga*). This group is strongly economically oriented (e.g., towards selling books and organizing fee-based seminars), but is also the most tolerant and inclusive. This group is a typical representative of the foreign branch of Ancestral fire; it has mainly spiritual goals, the founder visits it sporadically, and it is inclusive so that radicalism does not hinder commercial activities.

As an example of a ritual, I briefly quote the instructions for performing the self-initiation ritual given by Vladimír Kurovski, the leader and founder of the group – a ritual which can be performed by each sympathizer individually:

On Sunday, place the table in the middle of the room, at 10 o'clock stand in front of the table facing east, light a candle and place it on the table. Look to the east and say the prayer: 'Our Supreme God, the Creator of all visible and invisible, the essence of love, truth, and justice, hear my prayer, come to me in the flame of a candle, with the Holy Spirit of your original light! I open my heart and summon your strength!'

(...)

You will see a golden crown appear on the candle – the glow of a heavenly fire; then burn a bunch of herbs from the candle (wild thyme), place it as a sacrifice on a plate, and say the prayer: 'As the visible becomes invisible, so the Spirit of God he hears and sees everything, walks among us. I am sending the sacrifice to the Supreme and

52 "Akademia Rodosvet" [online], <<https://akademiarodosvet.webnode.sk/>>.

I am summoning the power of light! Just as forty oaks stand, the branches touch the sky with me and my teachers, we call on the sacrament of heaven.⁵³

In order to determine the factors that give rise to the group's fluidity, I will now analyze the most significant spiritual practices of these groups. It is not surprising that the elements of fire and light appear strongly in the discourse of these groups and are represented by two keywords: "Ra" and "Agni." The word "Agni" will be discussed later, and the word "Ra" means solar energy. There is one more term in the discourse of Slavic Aryan Vedas – *Ynglia* –, which means the primordial fire of creation.⁵⁴

In the case of the theocentric group, the *raison d'être* is not merely to continue the national folk tradition (annual fires – Saint John – 24 June) or to revive the pre-Christian tradition. This Slovak tradition has been significantly modified by the addition of Indian (Vedic) elements.

Fire is the most characteristic element of the celebrations because a magical, protective, cleansing, and healing ability has been attributed to it. Although fire is the most prominent element in Saint John celebration the element of water is also essential, as the purpose of the fires is to summon rain.⁵⁵

The magical function of the ceremony dates back to pre-Christian times, "but the transition to Christianity was accompanied by rebuilding (...) of time ideas (...) the archaic relationship to time was relegated to the background, creating a lower layer of folk consciousness".⁵⁶ The lighting of the fire was a magical act, accompanied by a blessing, or a verbal welcome to the fire, because the fire had several magical functions.⁵⁷

In the case of the theocentric group and Zhiva–yarga, there is a modification (or enrichment) of folk annual fire ritual. In addition to the tradition of the solstice fire Vedic Slavism supplements it with elements of the *agnihotra* ritual, also known from contemporary Hinduism; Agni is a fire god, a priest, and a mediator between the world of people and gods.

53 Vladimír Kurovský – Lada Kurovská, *Živa – Životná sila Slovanov*, Bratislava: Eugenika 2015, 101-104.

54 This understanding comes from the Slavic-Aryan Vedas, where everything bright (radiant) is considered good and, in contrast, everything dark or black is considered bad.

55 J. Botík – K. Apáthyová-Rusnáková – P. Slavkovský, *Encyklopédia ľudovej kultúry...*, 212.

56 Anton Gurevich, *Kategorie středověké kultury*, Praha: Mladá fronta 1978, 82.

57 Sergey Alexandrovich Tokarev, *Kalendarnyye obychaayi i obryady v stranach zarubezhnoy Yevropy IV: Istoricheskyyekorni i razvitie obykhajev*, Moskva: Nauka 1978; Kazimierz Moszynski, *Kultura ludowa Slowian II. Kultura duchowa*, Warszawa: Książka i Wiedza 1967; Vladimir Yakovlevich Propp, *Russkiye agrarnyye prazdniki*, Leningrad: Izdatelstvo Leningradskogo universiteta 1963.

Agnihotra – a sacrificial ritual – is a Vedic ceremony performed by the head of the family at the home fireplace.⁵⁸

Although Slovak believers do not consciously reflect on this “Indian kinship”, such a function is also described in the Slavic-Aryan Vedas:

[T]he fire god Semargl has a plasma essence – like our soul (...). With the help of fire through the (...) sacrifices, we send information about ourselves to the Upper World. (...) Fire is our helper in getting rid of stereotypes. When we stand by the fire on the body of the Mother Earth with bare feet, (...) energy of man, and the energy of the earth connect. In this way, at the same time, by chanting (...) – we can call them mantras (...) we clean the channels of information transmission within our own body.⁵⁹

The book *Slavyanstvo* also describes the ideal course upper mentioned sacrificial ritual. It must take place in nature, without unnecessary spectators. According to the Slavic–Aryan calendar (*Kolyadov dar*), the relevant rune of the holiday is laid out with stones on the ground and a firewood pyramid is constructed above it (not maple wood). The sacrifices are deposited north of the fire. First, the hymns are chanted up, and then the fire – Agni – is lit. The sacrifice is followed by meditation, in which the participants should listen to their inner selves and the surrounding countryside. The sacrificial fire must not be put out – this will allow the Gods to remain in the state of Agni.⁶⁰

There are several differences between the ideal ceremony and the real one. For example, no particular wood is used, the runes are not used and swimming in the river and walking on the hot coals are omitted. A flag is added as a symbol of the deity. These modifications are based on the fact that the design of the ideal ritual serves the Ynglis Church in Russia and presupposes the presence of spiritual professionals (priests). Therefore, this design is not precisely observed in Slovakia. The fire always has a magical “communicative” function. Fire establishes a connection with the supernatural world. The understanding of fire as an element of regenerative power, the renewal of life, creativity, and the destruction of the demonic is also reflected here.⁶¹

Such a magical and symbolic understanding of fire is present in the anthropocentric group, but at the same time it reflects several magical references known from traditional folk magic: the magic of the beginning – starting by burning paper; imitative magic – the transfer into the desired

58 K. Werner, *Encyklopedie Hinduismu...*, 44.

59 Alexander Yurievich Khinevich, *Slavyanstvo*, Poprad: Tartaria 2017, 277.

60 *Ibid.*, 278.

61 J. Botík – K. Apáthyová–Rusnáková – P. Slavkovský, *Encyklopédia ľudovej kultúry...*, 42.

state; and cleansing magic – the belief that by burning paper, the participant is spiritually cleansed.

Fire plays a more significant role in the other two groups. In the group Zhiva-yarga, where a fire is lit through ritual ignition (for theocentrists by drawing and verbal sanctification; in Zhiva-yarga only by verbal sanctification, again the traditional concept of verbal magic is applied here), the fire takes over the function of the portal to the spiritual world, with which participants can subsequently work, or communicate. In the theocentric group, the connection with the gods is thus directly mediated, to which they subsequently present sacrifices and demand the fulfillment of their desires. The second function that this group attributes to the fire is purification.

In the group Zhiva-yarga, fire is understood similarly as a gateway to the divine world, which the believer opens with a verbal ritual formula – a prayer. Then, through this gate, the believer can “send” the sacrifice and draw divine power.

The described fire rituals and their magical elements have two important functions in the groups of Vedic Slavism. The first is identity-forming and the second is legitimizing. The ethnoreligious Pagan discourse shapes the identity of these groups and de facto determines who can be a believer of Vedic Slavism and who cannot. Subsequently, through the above-mentioned rituals, they confirm or create this identity. This is most clearly demonstrated by the example of the anthropocentric group: the believer first cleanses himself in writing of all negative influences, including, for example, another religion. This purification is ceremonially completed by the burning of this text, after which the believer creates a new identity in writing (with the help of magic words) already as a Vedic Slav. Again, this creation is completed by burning the written text. These meditations need to be repeated for the effect to last.

The legitimizing function serves to confirm, or deepen the acquired identity, but also to modify and adjust it according to the requirements (or necessity) of the believer or the environment. It can serve internal or external purposes, both group and individual. In the anthropocentric group, the legitimizing component is noticeable even in an aggressive form, as this group also performs magical attacks (curses), especially against other religious representatives. Even the death of the diocesan Bishop of Spiš was interpreted as the effectiveness of the curse.⁶²

62 Lodomír, “Úvahy” [online], <<https://www.tartaria.sk/pravda-dnes/ovovlivnovanie/700-uvahy>>, [18 February 2022]. The reference probably refers to the death of Bishop Štefan Sečka (1953-2020): Mária Šimoňáková, “Zomrel spišský diecézny biskup Štefan Sečka” [online], *Korzář Spiš*, 28 October 2020, <<https://spis.korzar.sme>>.

Other groups do not practice such magical attacks, due to karmic consequences. The legitimizing function stands out significantly in the theocentric group; it can be observed during the annual fires, when part of the ceremony overlaps with the well-known custom of annual fires. It is supposed to act as a symbolic magical connection to the “ancestral memory” and to deepen the patriotic/nationalist feeling. The second Indian-Vedic component gives this ritual the appearance of antiquity, thus legitimizing the identity of Vedic Slavism in terms of the historical factor.

Conclusion

The movement of the Slavic-Aryan Vedas is a manifestation of the growth of post-traditional religiosity/spirituality in Slovakia. All groups of Vedic Slavs are ethno-religious; that is, they do not separate ethnicity from religion. All groups adopt this ethnicity, though they work with it differently. The Zhiva-yarga group perceives it loosely, while the anthropocentric group gravitates to it very strongly (however, this group refers to all “white people” as Russians, or “Slavs-Russians”). The theocentric group, on the other hand, emphasizes nationality and state (regional) affiliation more (i.e., within pan-Slavism). However, ethno-religiousness is only one of the non-traditional elements. These “exotic” elements serve to clearly distinguish its ideology from other religious systems and to establish and legitimize these groups within the majority society. It is the combination of these elements that form the very idea of “Vedism” (Vedic Slavism). The elements of the so-called knowledge (*znaniye*)⁶³, which is received through meditation or communication with the astral world, allow groups to gradually reveal their teachings and flexibly modify them according to their needs. The second non-traditional key element is the element of “originality”; it allows groups to accept or incorporate any knowledge (archaeological finds, monuments, literature, customs etc.) into their teachings and declare it “original”, “Slavic”, but “hidden until now”.

The ethno-religious basis of spiritual Slavism is also the main aspect that attracts sympathizers. However, this base can be adopted by everyone; in other words, some sympathizers (even groups) emphasize the “Slavic” aspect (nationalism or culture), while others attach importance to “spiritual Slavism” (esoteric-meditative and ceremonial practice). The increase in

sk/c/22520446/zomrel-spissky-diecezny-biskup-stefan-secka.html>, [18 February 2022].

63 “Znaniye” can be understood as a certain gradual initiation or adjustment of teachings according to external circumstances. For example, during the Covid 19 pandemic, groups refused vaccination as it is a tool for the extermination of Slavs. This “znaniye” came to them from the astral world.

the number of sympathizers is undoubtedly helped by the free association (the absence of official membership) and the above-mentioned key nontraditional elements that guarantee the faith's dynamism and fluidity. These groups are loosely organized, comprising only a small number of individuals (usually from 2 to 5 people) that are the elites or organizers, and other "members" or supporters who gravitate to an idea, or ideology, but not to an exclusive group.⁶⁴ In addition, many are aware of the reputation that Vedic Slavism has and are not willing to talk about it on a personal level.

In terms of demographics, anthropocentric adherents are mostly older people in their 50s and 60s. In terms of sex, attendance was balanced. The leader Ladomír has a university degree and works as a manager. The theocentric followers are younger, the average age being around 40 years. The sex ratio is balanced. Theocentrics also raise children in their faith, taking them to ceremonies, etc. One of the leaders of the group has a university education; otherwise, secondary education prevails.

Vedic Slavism must be understood as a dynamic conglomerate of various ideological (and spiritual) currents connected by several supporting ideas that oscillate around the idea of "Vedism". At the same time, Vedic Slavism forms organized groups and offers its sympathizers a wider portfolio than spiritual development.

The leaders and sympathizers would certainly disagree with the use of the term "religious/spiritual alternative", not to mention NA. The elites and followers of this faith see themselves as the rightful successors of the post-Christian era, and as the "true and original" religion of the Slavs. Although sympathizers of this group define themselves as "alternative", concerning the social order and society, their discourse is dominated by national and social themes. Russian influence on Slovak groups is very strong (anthropocentrics and theocentrics), yet such groups are not just branches of Russian organizations (such opinions exist in the wider public).

Vedic Slavism is the product of three processes: individualization, detraditionalization, and resacralization. Although these processes manifested in individual groups differently, they are present in each. Individualization – the search for individual personal faith – led the overwhelming majority of sympathizers to this ideology. This is logical, given that the esoteric

⁶⁴ On the winter day of Perun celebrated by the theocentric group (13 January 2020), six people participated in the ritual. In the winter solstice festival (21 December 2021), nearly 150 people participated. This was "too much" even for the organizers; one of them subsequently told me: "most of those people, I have never seen before and I have not felt the love for our (meaning Slavic Vedism) cause from them." (Author's field research Bratislava, 22. 12. 2021). Organizers suspected that some of the participants were in fact undercover police officers.



lineage and principles are identical to those of the NA, and that, to varying degrees, the concept of personal (custom-made) faith is present in all groups.

Detraditionalization – the decline in the importance of tradition – led to the emergence of alternative teaching, which is precisely the case of Vedic Slavism. It is an “imported” religion, a product of religious pluralism. The followers chose it voluntarily; it was not the only alternative, but it seemed to be the most viable, thanks to the elements of knowledge and “originality”. Several sympathizers joined only after they had “experimented” with other spiritualities (individualization). Detraditionalization is most present in the anthropocentric and theocentric groups.

The third process, resacralisation, follows the previous two. After “finding themselves” in detraditionalized religious pluralism, sympathizers who have chosen one of the Vedic Slavic groups are interested in reforming the social and religious environment through spiritual techniques or by establishing communes. The idea that there must be a “re-sanctification” of the Slavic living space remains preserved.

Groups adhering to Vedic Slavism in Slovakia are a result of the processes taking place in postmodern society. It is a freely forming, dynamically metamorphosing non-church and post-traditional religiosity with a divergent worldview and structural forms, currently gravitating around the pro-Russian teachings of the Slavic Vedas.

SUMMARY

Vedic Slavism in Slovakia: Ideology and Practice

The paper deals with religiously oriented groups with the umbrella name the Slavic–Aryan Vedas movement. This movement is unique in its teachings, which are Pagan at their core but significantly modified, incorporating other, mostly oriental traditions (Hinduism, Buddhism, ancient Egyptian religion, Judaism, and others). The article aims to provide a general overview of groups active in Slovakia. The main aim was to answer the following research questions. Are these groups a part of the Pagan milieu? What are the elements that are crucial for the ideology of Vedic Slavism? How are these elements manifested in practice? The study also explains the origins of these groups, the cultural context, and the creation of subgroups. The data presented in this study come from field research (2019–2021) using qualitative methods such as participatory observation, online ethnography, and autoethnography.

Keywords: Vedism Slavism; Slavic – Aryan Vedas; Paganism; Slavism; alternative spirituality

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