



**A Review of KAARINA AITAMURTO, *PAGANISM, TRADITIONALISM, NATIONALISM: NARRATIVES OF RUSSIAN RODNOVERIE.***

**New York; London: Routledge, 2016, 222 pp.**

***Andrei Tiukhtiaev***

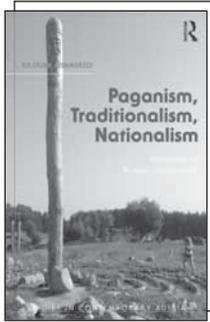
European University at St Petersburg  
3 Gagarinskaya Str., St Petersburg, Russia  
atiukhtiaev@eu.spb.ru

**Abstract:** Kaarina Aitamurto's study deals with Russian neopaganism and consists of a detailed description of the narratives used by adherents of the native faith to present their movement. Focusing on two well-known native faith communities (the Circle of Pagan Tradition and the Union of Slavic Communities of the Slavic Native Faith), the author attempts to make sense of neopaganism in Russia in the context of modern theories of religion. The review examines how certain theoretical and methodological preferences of the author's have influenced her interpretation of the material that she has collected.

**Keywords:** neopaganism, native faith, traditionalism, nationalism.

**To cite:** Tiukhtiaev A., 'A Review of Kaarina Aitamurto, Paganism, Traditionalism, Nationalism: Narratives of Russian Rodnoverie. New York; London: Routledge, 2016, 222 pp.', *Forum for Anthropology and Culture*, 2017, no. 13, pp. 339–348.

**URL:** <http://anthropologie.kunstkamera.ru/files/pdf/eng013/tiukhtiaev.pdf>



**Kaarina Aitamurto**, *Paganism, Traditionalism, Nationalism: Narratives of Russian Rodnoverie*. New York; London: Routledge, 2016, 222 pp.

Kaarina Aitamurto's study deals with Russian neopaganism and consists of a detailed description of the narratives used by adherents of the native faith to present their movement. Focusing on two well-known native faith communities (the Circle of Pagan Tradition and the Union of Slavic Communities of the Slavic Native Faith), the author attempts to make sense of neopaganism in Russia in the context of modern theories of religion. The review examines how certain theoretical and methodological preferences of the author's have influenced her interpretation of the material that she has collected.

Keywords: neopaganism, native faith, traditionalism, nationalism.

Kaarina Aitamurto has been studying pagan communities in Russia since 2005. Since that time she has accumulated a corpus of texts, interviews and observations that have formed the material for the work here reviewed. A Finnish researcher, she works at the Aleksanteri Institute in Helsinki and is also a fellow of the Centre for Russian Studies, which focuses on the study of problems of modernisation in the Russian Federation. To a large extent Aitamurto's affiliation reflects the specifics of her research interests. In this context Russian paganism is an example of a movement whose members are acutely sensitive to the processes associated with globalisation, and are developing their own responses to them. Moreover, these responses are in some respects different from those produced by their pagan 'colleagues' in the West, above all in Western Europe and North America. A division of modern paganism into 'Western' and 'Eastern' wings is the starting point from which the Russian case is addressed (p. 2). Aitamurto is led by the fact of the distinctions between 'Eastern' and 'Western' paganism to justify her interest, stressing that the first is characterised by antiglobalist tendencies (ethnic nationalism, racism, antisemitism, antipathy towards migrants, etc.) which need to be studied and placed within the context of research on contemporary religion.

**Andrei Tiukhtiaev**

European University  
at St Petersburg  
3 Gagarinskaya Str.,  
St Petersburg, Russia  
atiukhtiaev@eu.spb.ru

The author relies on such approach as a sociological analysis of the narratives, which explains both the specifics of the material selected and her manner of working with it. Aitamurto follows the representatives of this approach in relying on the assumption that the narratives are the fundamental form of the presentation of the community to the outside. Such a presentation provides it with the opportunity to justify the relevance and necessity of its own ideas and to attract new followers. At the same time, the research question is not only which narratives can be identified within the neopagan milieu: it is divided into two parts. Firstly, Aitamurto aims to elucidate how modern Russian pagans position their religion. Secondly, it is important for her to juxtapose their presentational strategies with the basic trends that exist in sociological research into late-modern religion (p. 4).

However, the theoretical basis of the work is not limited to this. While the author's very choice of approach allows it to be understood that to a great extent she holds a constructivist position, she simultaneously critiques the constructivist view of social reality (p. 73). However, she does not offer any extensive critique of constructivism, noting only that her work attempts to combine constructivism with the hermeneutic approach usual for religious studies. She notes that this viewpoint allows her to focus on how the actual members of neopagan communities regard themselves and their religion (p. 6). I have questions both about the way the question is posed and about Kaarina Aitamurto's theoretical preferences, but for the moment I shall recount the basic results of the work under review, noting *en passant* how certain presuppositions on the researcher's part have been reflected in the interpretation of the material.

As already stated, the materials themselves include observations, texts and interviews collected in the Russian native faith milieu. The author explains the term 'native faith' (*rodnoverie*), and indicates that the name is characteristic of the pagans themselves, and so the research focuses on those people who are inclined to designate themselves in such a way. It is noted furthermore, that the material includes the results of participant observation undertaken in two pagan organisations: the Circle of Pagan Tradition and the Union of Slavic Communities of the Slavic Native Faith. Both are mostly situated in Moscow and St Petersburg; there are communities in other cities, but the author carried out her fieldwork mainly in the two capitals. Aitamurto calls the first of the two organisations more 'liberal' and the second xenophobic and conservative. Such attitudes manifest themselves in the degree of acceptance of other people's ethnic traditions. While the Circle of Pagan Tradition has a tolerant attitude towards other cultures and takes as fundamental only the necessity for everyone to follow the traditions of his / her own people,

the Union of Slavic Communities of the Slavic Native Faith is wont to place an exclusive stress on the Russian ethnic tradition against a background of the rejection of any kind of otherness, be it ethnic, racial or religious (p. 12).

It is curious that after this the reader only rarely encounters any data acquired during participant observation. Instead of this, in most cases the author relies on texts published by the ideologues of the aforementioned communities. Moreover, Aitamurto herself remarks that the research is based on this sort of material in order to indicate the communities' means of representation for potential researchers, which is wholly in accord with her declared approach. Participant observation, as she notes, was to a large extent conducted in order to determine what was actually read by adherents of the native faith and the set of authors who are accepted in this milieu, since by no means all native faith texts will be recognised as such by the majority of adherents (p. 6). However, the resulting effect is not, to my mind, altogether beneficial to the research. In the first place, against the background of a description of Russian paganism as in principle racist and radically conservative, the Circle of Pagan Tradition, despite having a somewhat different ideology, is often combined with the Union of Slavic Communities of the Slavic Native Faith in the torrent of quotations from the various native faith texts cited by the author. In this way the native faith, despite the existence within it of contradictory ideological tendencies, is consequently presented in the work rather as a monolithic phenomenon, even though Aitamurto notes that it is not actually such. Besides, in no way does the author explain her choice of the communities on which the work is focused. How representative are they? Can it be said that the Russian native faith is reducible to these groups alone? In the second place, there are questions about how participatory the observation conducted by the author was. If an ethnographical method of collecting information was used in order to select the relevant texts for analysis, it seems to me that it would have been useful to describe for the reader the process of selecting these texts and the circumstances in which participant observation was conducted. The nitty-gritty of the research is invisible to the reader.

The first chapter of the book serves as an introduction, and everything described above — the aims and questions, the character of the material, the theoretical foundation, the explanation of the term 'native faith' and likewise the description of the ethical problems that arose in the course of the fieldwork, which will be discussed below — is included in it. The second chapter is a short history of the native faith. Native faith is viewed from a wide perspective, beginning in the Romantic era and ending in the present. This historical excursus is essential in order to show the roots of modern paganism — the idealisation of the villager and the formation of the image of the

‘noble savage’. Aitamurto notes the chief historical paradox of the new paganism. Although followers of this movement see themselves as continuing traditional village culture, they in fact rely on a foundation of ideas constructed by the European intellectual elite in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (pp. 18–21).

After this the author concentrates on the history of the new paganism in its Russian context: the appearance during the last days of the Russian Empire of ideas which have influenced the movement, the place of the images of Russian traditions in the Soviet historical imagination, the formation of the first dissident pagan groups in the late Soviet period, and the emergence of the movement in the 1990s and its popularisation in the first decade of the present century. Aitamurto lists the key ideologues of Russian neopaganism, draws attention to details of their biographies and their personal contributions to the formation of the pagan movement. She notes in particular such figures as Anatoliy Ivanov, Konstantin Vasilyev, Nikolay Bogdanov, Valeriy Emelyanov, Grigoriy Yakutovskiy (Vseslav Svyatozar), Aleksey Dobrovolskiy (Dobroslav), Viktor Bezverkhii (Ded Ostromysl), Alexander Asov, Aleksey Belov, Vadim Kazakov, Major General Konstantin Petrov, Ilya Cherkasov (Veslav), Aleksandr Khinevich, Vladimir Megre and others. Besides personalities, she also identifies projects — texts, movements, journalism and films, such as the books *Desionizatsiya* [Desionisation], *Kniga Velesa* [the Book of Veles] and *Zvenyashchie kedry Rossii* [the Ringing Cedars of Russia], the film *Rus iznachalnaya* [Primordial Rus] and the journal *Nauka i religiya* [Science and Religion] (at the time when Asov and Belov were working there) and many others. Besides this, Aitamurto considers the circumstances in which the organisations which are the subject of her research came into being and developed. In my opinion, this description of the habitat of the various pagan and New Age projects is a significant achievement and makes an important contribution to the study of the Russian context in which occulture exists as a space for texts and practices opposed to everything official [Asprem, Dyrendal 2015].

The third chapter occupies only five pages of text. Here the author describes the movement’s social composition, and also the basic ideas and practices characteristic of it. She remarks that it is hard to determine the number of adherents, and gives certain figures that are circulating among the believers in the native faith themselves, and also reckons up the number of internet subscribers to pagan resources. Thus we learn that the communities studied by Kaarina Aitamurto include representatives of different generations, but where gender is concerned they are predominantly male. A significant number of adherents have higher education, usually technical. The educated participants often become the ideologues of the movement, while the rank and file is made up of students and pensioners. There is also

a group of sympathisers, who are, as a rule, relatives or friends of the members of the communities, and who may take part in certain significant occasions. Among such occasions are the festivals associated with important dates in the reconstructed 'traditional' calendar, the chief pillars of which are the equinoxes and solstices. Besides these, the pagans conduct festivals which include various 'ritual' activities such as round dances. Aitamurto also identifies a set of key ideas that are at the bottom of the neopagan's world view. Among these are an interpretation of the gods as essences which manifest themselves exclusively in the visible world, a specific cosmology which supposes the existence of three aspects of reality, *yav*, *nav* and *prav*,<sup>1</sup> etc. I would particularly note here the author's observation that holidays and festivals provide the neopagans with a space to express criticism of the existing world order and to develop social innovations (p. 67).

For all that, the author's understanding of the native faith as an easily identifiable monolithic religious movement with a clear set of ideas and practices seems to me incorrect. I consider that the designation of these ideas and practices as theology and ritual is particularly questionable (and that is what one of the sections of this chapter is called — 'Theology and rituals') (p. 65). Hereby Aitamurto reveals the main defect of her work in this chapter, that is an unreflective attitude towards the category of 'religion', without which, it seems to me, an adequate description of such phenomena as neopaganism and traditionalism is impossible. In speaking of the ethical dilemmas encountered in the field, Aitamurto mentions that she found it difficult to decide what to classify as properly religious and what, for example, as political. While considerations of unity with nature or the nature of the gods are, according to the author's thinking, clear examples of the religious, conspiracy theories or antisemitism belong to the political field. But in the end Aitamurto concludes that constructing a hierarchy from the political to the religious is a reflection of her own stereotypes of what a religion should look like (p. 11). At the same time the work contains interesting observations around the fact that adherents of the native faith by no means always define themselves as religious people, and prefer to position their movement as a continuation of ancestral traditions. However, despite her attentiveness to the functioning of the categories of 'traditions' and 'religion', the author sometimes accompanies observations of that sort with utterances like this:

*Paradoxically, some Rodnovers who have no problems with the word 'religion' may be much less 'religious' from the point of view of scholarly analysis than some other Rodnovers who insist that what they are doing is simply 'living by tradition', for example (p. 15).*

<sup>1</sup> Roughly, the visible world, the spirit world, and the world order [Trans.].

It is evident from the quotation that she reduces the scholarly view of religion to the so-called religionist approach [Fitzgerald 2000]. From this point of view religion has a clear place in the social field and is limited to a narrow circle of questions, which does not include (read: should not include) questions, for example, of politics. Moreover, the composition of religion includes theology and ritual as mandatory elements. This view may be true in a particular historical context, but it should by no means underpin academic research, since it does not take account of the mobility of the borders between the religious and the non-religious and the variability of interpretations of the category of religion [Asad 1993; Beckford 2003]. Neopaganism and traditionalism are clear examples of how the category of the religious may be reinterpreted in different contexts by different groups who create new models and canons of 'religion', 'tradition' and 'nation' [Shtyrkov 2013]. Besides, it is by now a commonplace in the social sciences that the borders of religion and ethnic nationalism are highly porous. In this connection it seems to me that festivals and holidays that include round dances, fist fights or jumping over bonfires cannot so easily be called rituals, nor nebulous lucubrations on the nature of the gods, theology.<sup>1</sup> It is not the case that the adherents of the native faith are themselves inclined so to call them. In this instance it is essential to concentrate on the emic treatment of such categories as tradition and religion and to show how they function in the everyday life of native faith communities.

The fourth chapter and the two that follow are devoted to the three basic narratives that Kaarina Aitamurto has identified, starting from how the adherents of the native faith explain the necessity and importance of their religion. The author calls the first of these 'saving the nation'. Basically this supposes the idea of the need for Slavonic religion to be reborn and for modern man to follow it. The author notes the importance for the narrative of such metaphoric language as 'spirit, blood and soil', which essentialises a person's belonging to a particular tradition (p. 79). Furthermore, she notes certain plots that this narrative includes, and also points out the logical and discursive moves that are important for its construction. In this context she finds significant the idea of the French sociologist Danièle Hervieu-Léger that religion functions in modern society as a means of restoring the connection between people and their history and tradition — literally, its remembrance (*anamnesis*). Aitamurto stresses the fact that the adherents of the native faith are acutely sensible of the loss of the connection with tradition, and they see reuniting with it as a means of stabilising social life, which presupposes a homogenisation of society. Insofar as this sort of amnesia is connected with the specifics of modern society, the pagan antimodern

---

<sup>1</sup> On the eclectic and contradictory nature of neopagan beliefs see: [Laruelle 2008].

protest, in the author's view, looks perfectly well-founded (p. 115). However, it seems to me that such an opposition between the modern and the non-modern is rather questionable.

The author also finds it important to place the thought of the native faith within the context of the works of social theoreticians concerned with the study of globalisation, nationalism, modernity and modern religion. However, Aitamurto does not give any clear indication of the theories that she herself holds when she interprets her material. Despite the presence of a description of contemporary approaches to the study of nationalism at the beginning of the fourth chapter, and a critique of the rigid dichotomy between so-called Eastern and Western nationalism (read: liberal and illiberal, or: tolerant and xenophobic), all that the reader can understand is the fact that the material does not conform to such rigid dichotomies (pp. 73–6). This is a valuable observation, and the statement of the problem of nationalism in the Russian pagan milieu is very important. However, one would have hoped for clearer conclusions from research of this sort.

The only thing on which Aitamurto speaks with confidence is the presence in the native faith texts of elements from both conservative and liberal discourses (incidentally, it would be no bad thing to enunciate the problem of such denominations as the (il)liberal or (in)-tolerant native faith). In particular, when she describes the narrative of 'saving the nation', she says that even though xenophobic attitudes do exist, resulting from a desire to enclose oneself within one's own culture and save it from globalising tendencies, the native faith's attitude to gender and sexuality is acquiring certain liberal and 'less essentialist' features (pp. 90–1). It seems to me that such deliberations on the author's part betray an excessively unitary view of modernity which seems to ignore the fact that antimodern protest is also by its very nature situated within the flow of modernity. Furthermore, it is far from clear why the subject of gender and sexuality should have arisen in a chapter devoted to the narrative of the need to save one's tradition and culture. And this is not the only instance of this kind. The correlation of certain native faith ideas with the narratives identified raises questions and, it seems to me, requires additional argumentation. Why is the native faith attitude to gender and sex referred to the narrative described in the fourth chapter, and not, say, to that on 'the end of mono-ideology'? The latter is described in the fifth chapter, to which we shall now proceed.

The narrative of 'the end of mono-ideology' supposes that there exist several dominant systems of viewing the world, and that these lie at the root of globalisation and have a negative effect on humanity. To counterbalance such mono-ideologies the adherents of the native faith propose that everyone should follow his / her own tradition. As an example of a mono-ideology the author cites Christianity.

In the fourth chapter the image of Christianity in the native faith arose in the context of the discussion of the topic of gender and sexuality, since the adherents of the native faith see Christianity as an ideology which alienates a person from his / her body, and to counterbalance this propose a freer and more natural attitude to sex (p. 84). In this way, the theme of sexuality would have fitted far better into the fifth chapter, and the distribution of various native faith ideas among the different narratives is far from obvious.

The fifth chapter's central idea is the existence of a contradiction between individualism and collectivism in the native faith. Aitamurto notes that the protest against mono-ideologies, besides calling for an observance of tradition, also supposes a critique of conventional morality and the individualisation of the criteria for ethical behaviour. However, Aitamurto ascribes this sort of pluralism rather to the representatives of the 'liberal' native faith. It thus remains unclear why this narrative is described in the form in which it is, and how it relates to the practices of the members of the Circle of Pagan Tradition and the Union of Slavic Communities of the Slavic Native Faith. There are two reasons for this lack of clarity. Firstly, in the vast majority of cases the author relies not on participant observation or interviews, but on the publication of native faith texts. Secondly, to all appearances, the results of participant observation are either insufficient, or else she ignores them, which makes it impossible to study how the ideas and narratives described function in a live social context.

The lack of a description of practices is particularly evident in the final, sixth chapter, which is devoted to the narrative 'back to the real thing' (p. 157). The real thing is here understood as nature and a sense of commonality with other people, which are opposed to individualism and modern consumer culture. According to the native faith texts, modern society alienates people from each other and from nature, and it is only possible to escape from this situation through a return to ancestral tradition, which offers the possibility of living a correct and wholesome life (pp. 182–3). But is this narrative not a kind of recapitulation of the 'saving the nation' narrative? And does not the return to tradition itself presuppose a rejection of mono-ideologies as a basis for modern society (in that sense, of course, in which adherents of the native faith understand the concept)? In the end, the three narratives identified in the book may all be reduced to a single one. Or else divided up into a greater number. The lack of clearly prescribed criteria for identifying narratives and describing the practices in which they are embodied creates a situation in which it is not entirely clear what the structure of the work is based on, particularly the last three chapters.

The author does not draw any clear conclusions in this work. If the reader finds the answer to the first part of her research question —

the search for a means of presenting the native faith through its own adherents — in the form of a description of the fundamental narratives which the researcher has identified in her material, the answer to the second question is not formulated in any clear manner. Not only that, it is still not entirely clear how Kaarina Aitamurto intended to answer it. Throughout the work we find references to Danièle Hervieu-Léger's ideas (religion as a means of 'restoring' the link with tradition), Zygmunt Bauman ('liquid modernity') and in the conclusion she adduces thoughts on the functioning of religion in modern society by Steve Bruce, José Casanova, and other researchers. None of these ideas, though, is taken as a basis for interpretation, and there is no interpretation as such of the material in the book.

Only towards the end of the work does it become clear that there was never supposed to be any interpretation. In her conclusion the author indicates that the native faith's adherents' words about the superiority of their religion to all others match what theoreticians of contemporary religion say (pp. 189–90). One of the main congruences of this sort, in her opinion, is the orientation of the native faith towards individual liberty in the construction of its religious practice, mistrust of authorities, and also the desire not to be limited to spiritual and religious questions, but to enter the sphere of science and politics as well. These tendencies are important elements in the discussion of contemporary religion within the framework of social theory, as Kaarina Aitamurto notes in passing. By formulating her conclusions in this way, the author literally arranges the thoughts of adherents of the native faith and of social theoreticians in a single row, emphasising the similarities and differences of their description of the state (no more, and no less) of contemporary society (pp. 190–8).

It seems to me that this sort of approach, presupposing the juxtaposition of the explanatory models of the contemporary religious situation of the native faith with those of academic discussion, requires a more serious foundation. On the basis of the text that has been read, such a direction of research does not appear entirely justified. It is unclear what precisely it offers us. Do we now understand better which theories are the most relevant for describing neopaganism and traditionalism? Are these theories sufficient for us, or must we make significant improvements to them?

Kaarina Aitamurto's book is unquestionably important, considering that at present there is a palpable lack of works devoted to Russian occulture, particularly new age and neopaganism. It is the lack of the ethnographical research that would allow an insight into the everyday life of the various neopagan groups that seems most acutely felt to me. Considering the discipline that Kaarina Aitamurto belongs to, and also the declared presence in the work of participant observation, one would have liked to see more ethnography in the work under

review. Furthermore, the absence of clear conclusions (which are evidently left for the reader to supply) is disappointing. But in any case the material presented by Kaarina Aitamurto is very interesting, and certain private observations are accurate and useful. In many respects neopaganism is a challenge to many sociological theories of religion, and it may be that this book will be the starting point for a more detailed discussion of this phenomenon and the specifics of its Russian variant.

### References

- Asad T., *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*. Baltimore; London: John Hopkins University Press, 1993, 335 pp.
- Asprem E., Dyrendal A., 'Conspirituality Reconsidered: How Surprising and How New is the Confluence of Spirituality and Conspiracy Theory?', *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 2015, vol. 30, is. 3, pp. 367–82. DOI: 10.1080/13537903.2015.1081339.
- Beckford J. A., *Social Theory and Religion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, IX+252 pp.
- Fitzgerald T., *The Ideology of Religious Studies*. New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, XIV+276 pp.
- Laruelle M., 'Alternative Identity, Alternative Religion? Neopaganism and the Aryan Myth in Contemporary Russia', *Nations and Nationalism*, 2008, vol. 14, is. 2, pp. 283–301.
- Shtyrkov S. A., 'Traditsionalistskie dvizheniya v sovremennom severno-osetinskom obshchestve i logika religioznogo natsionalizma' [Traditionalist Movements in Contemporary North Ossetia City and the Logic of Religious Nationalism], *Kavkazskiy gorod: Potentsial etnokulturnykh svyazey v urbanisticheskoy srede* [Caucasian City: Potential for Ethno-Cultural Connections in the Urban Area]. St Petersburg: MAE RAS, 2013, pp. 331–62. (In Russian).

*Translated by Ralph Cleminson*