

## Conference Paper

# Saving the Native Faith: Religious Nationalism in Slavic Neo-paganism (Ancient Russian Yngling Church of Orthodox Old Believers-Ynglings and Svarozhichi)

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## Abstract

Today dynamically developing neo-pagan communities in Ural and Siberia supply a discursive frame for national identities, group values and political ideologies. They share norms of ethnic solidarity, national unity, traditionalism and national awakening, just as the concepts of national peculiarity and anti-westernism. Russian patriotism, devotion to tribal ideals and the preposition about world's multiplicity (material and spiritual) are considered as ethical principals. The subject of this paper is the neo-pagan community of Ynglings in Western Siberia and the movement Svarozhichi in Ural region. These two movements have seldom been discussed in research literature and they provide interesting case studies of nationalistic new religiosity in the provincial Russia. Participants of these communities are fostering ethnic revival: not only remembering the glorious past, but also rebuilding it, here and now. The movement's legitimacy is based on a presumed continuity with the cultural heritage of pagan ancestors. They advocate a conception of Slavs unity based on Aryan identity and the willingness to give up Christianity, which is deemed responsible for two thousand years of identity aberrations.

**Keywords:** neo-paganism, religious nationalism, traditionalism, Ural, Western Siberia

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## 1. Introduction

In the social consciousness of contemporary Russia, there is a strong correlation between concept of religion and concept of nation. In the discourse of the so-called radical Orthodox nationalists or pagans, who functioned as "anti-Orthodoxy" and who try to revitalize allegedly ancient, even primordial ethnic faith, you can easily hear words about "unity of Russian nation", "national originality of Russian Orthodoxy" and

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even about “the extinction of Russian people”. At the same time, specialists observing the political and intellectual life of contemporary Russia have begun to notice that the development of references to “Slavic paganism” and to Russia’s “Aryan” origin also can be found. One can learn many interesting things about a great civilization of ancient Slavs, which disappeared because of a Jewish conspiracy, about Christianity as an evil invention of those who perverted the teaching of Christ to subjugate other peoples, etc. These themes (conspiracy against Russia, a special predestination of Russian people and so on) seem to occupy a sizeable place in contemporary Russian publications and Internet resources. In this context, such issues as “what forms do projects of religious nationalism do?” or “how do these projects emerge and how are they promoted?” are great importance today.

My research focuses on the neo-pagan community of Ancient Russian Yngling Church of Orthodox Old Believers-Ynglings in Western Siberia and the movement Svarozhichi in Ural region. These two movements have seldom been discussed in research literature and they provide interesting case studies of nationalistic new religiosity in the provincial Russia. An analysis of the scientific material shows that the problem of contemporary Paganism in Ural and Siberia is the most relevant and unresearched. This circumstance has determined the basic idea and content of the current article.

The following analysis is based on data obtained in the course of fieldwork in Omsk and Ekaterinburg at the beginning of the 2000s. We analyzed several unstructured interviews, and our methodology included engaged observation as well as photo and video fixation. Our informants were for the most part young and middle aged people who were members of these communities. The materials for this article also include data from the analysis of internet fora that focuses on the Ynglings in Omsk region and the movement Svarozhichi in Ekaterinburg.

We use Roger Brubaker’s theory of religious nationalism [2] and Anthony Smith’s nation and myth analysis [10] as the theoretical foundations for our research. According to A. Smith, the ideas of religious nationalism are often connected to ethno-political processes, national symbolization and local interpretations. On the basis of these theoretical ideas we highlight some contemporary narratives that are connected to contemporary Paganism.

## 2. Neo-paganism: Reimagining Religious Tradition

We argue that modern paganism plays an instrumental role for mobilization because it requires the symbols, myths and memories of ethnic cores, which are able to generate a sense of solidarity and purpose in a secular era. The characteristic spiritual features (concepts of divine electivity, group beliefs of national peculiarity, norms of ethnic unity, concepts of sacred history and sacred destiny) represent a complex frame for the political appropriation of contemporary spirituality. In the long-term tension the myths serve to mobilize religious actions and regenerate the religious communities [10]. Myths are demanded in neopaganism because they may push activity in different directions; but they also limit the options and present a circle of assumptions and dynamic impulses, which help to raise the self-consciousness of religious members. The artificial character of the mythologems introduced through the efforts of religious (often charismatic) leaders can be accepted in the sphere of the religious group of pagans, but this group doesn't resist the introduction of these mythologems, it needs them. Mythical constructs are numerous, but the ones – principal for the organizing of neo-pagans - are the mythologems of "Chosen people", "magic doctrine and primordial tradition", "ancient history", "ethnic purity", and "golden age", the aim of which is to bring sense to the individual existence of the religious group, and arouse the feelings of unity and greatness of one's own religion and nation. They designate a space and time for action, a religious activity; they contain impulses for collective action and rituals. On this basis the discourse of neo-pagans stimulates the implementation of the radical and extremist methods for relevant political and social issues decision.

Marlene Laruelle states that phenomenon of neo-paganism is deeply rooted in the Soviet past and different searches for identity within intellectual circles, whether they were tied to the Communist Party or to dissidents [7]. At the same time many scholars agreed that it was the collapse of the communist system in Eastern Europe enabled the Pagan movements in the regions of Russia to surface in the public sphere. According to Ronald Inglehart, social instability increases conservative values [5], and indeed Slavic Paganism reflects the post-socialist rise of conservatism and nationalism in the regions of Russia. In the 1990s, the social turbulence of the time manifested itself in the growing activity of various Pagan communities, which was typical of the period. However, at the beginning of the 2000s, the economic and social stabilization of Russia seems to have led to less politicized and radical forms of neo-paganism.

At present time, neo-pagan movements, being marginal religious strand in comparison with the Orthodox Church, are extremely heterogeneous and active. There are

ultra-nationalist communities (with spiritual basis for their nationalist political convictions), and more liberal groups (samples of Paganism as a Green religion or adepts who fascinated by its aesthetically lavish rituals, which provide strong emotional experiences and an opportunity to express one's creativity). Most importantly, many groups create original combinations of these ideologies. Although the neo-pagans do not make up an organized political force, it is quite clear that their ideas have been growing in recent years. This movement in Russia includes ideologies of different orientations: national-democratic movement, "Vedic socialism", "Northern brotherhood", the teaching of the Pagan Priest Dobroslav, the Church of Navi, Living Ethics, etc. We can use in this case the metaphor of a tree with roots deep in the earth but branches reaching into the sky.

It is extremely difficult to estimate the number of small, unofficial pagan communities in Russia. Thus, the Ministry of Justice registered only about forty neo-pagan movements in 2003, whereas there are probably several hundred of them in existence [3]. The key centers of Neopaganism are situated in the big cities (Moscow, Saint-Petersburg, Ekaterinburg, Omsk, etc). Despite dramatic differences in the views of various forms of Paganism, they also share many common features—for instance, their emphasis on "war" against Orthodoxy and other monotheistic religions, globalization, official science and intention to freedom of thought and individual responsibility. They propagate also an anti-Semitic and socially conservative ideology.

According to Kaarina Aitamurto, "naturally the nature of nationalism varies between countries. Whereas in Central and Eastern Europe native Paganism is often seen as an inherently anti-Soviet and anti-Communist force, Russian Pagans' relationship with their past is more complex" [1]. The movement's legitimacy of neo-pagans in Russia is based often on a presumed continuity with the cultural heritage of pagan ancestors. It is important to bear in mind the fundamental historical condition of these religious movements as a return, rebuilding, and reimagining religious traditions that were forcibly suppressed.

### 3. "The Invention of a Tradition": Ancient Russian Yngling Church of Orthodox Old Believers-Ynglings

Ancient Russian Yngling Church of Orthodox Old Believers-Ynglings was founded in Omsk, Western Siberia. This movement was variously classified as a branch of Rodnoveriye, but often not recognised as such by mainstream Rodnover groups. The members of the movement call themselves *Pravoslavs* (Orthodox Christian in Russian), but

maintain that the word is older than Christianity and originally referred to Russian who honored (*slavit'*) the truth (*Pravda*). Thanks to the efforts of Alexander Khinevich (b. in 1961), their charismatic leader, the Ancient Russian Yngling Church of Orthodox Old Believers-Ynglings, which has been known since the 1980s, was registered in Omsk in 1992, (In 2004 the church lost its official status, and in 2009 Aleksandr Khinevich and all the Ynglings groups were prosecuted at the Omsk court on charge of religious extremism (in particular, the use of the label "Slavic Aryan" and of the gammadion symbol Kolovrat) and the religion was temporarily banned. In 2011 the judges decided the dismissal of the charges. Although in 2004 it lost the official status of registered religious community, it has communities throughout Russia and professes massive selling of books and video material) although Ynglings themselves assert that their church has existed since time immemorial and was the first religion of the "white race" and the "wise holy ancestors" of the Russian peoples. Ynglings teach that "Yngly" (*Ynglia*) is the primordial fiery force from which the universe is arisen. It is accurate to speak of Ynglings as a "new" religion or modern pagan religion, even though the content of the religion is derived from very old sources. (<http://derzhavarus.ru/ingliizm-vera-slavyan-ariiev.html>)

Alexander Khinevich (also known as Alexander, AY Khinevich, Pater Dii (Патер Дий), and Pater Dii Aleksandr Hinevich) did not get a systematic education but he was able to articulate the ideas of ancient religions, occultism and synthesize a wide array of historical, archaeological, and philosophical sources. Khinevich proposes paranormal activities and also provides consulting services. In the eyes of his followers Alexander Khinevich has incredible ability to read peoples' weaknesses and manipulate them to carrying out his will. (The author's personal archive) Among adepts of his teaching we can mention, for example, a pseudo-scholar and well-known Ynglings writer Aleksei Trehlebov, who states that the tradition of Slavs gives three postulates for distinguishing truth: word (*Slovo*), Vedas (*Vedy*) and experience (*opyt*).

The community's activity is financed by parishioner's sponsors contributions and its own commercial organizations "Asgard" and "Iriy" involved in building and consulting. Teenagers and young people, especially under- and postgraduate students, are predominant among Omsk Ynglings. They are attracted with exotic rituals and special spirit atmosphere. Their ethnocentric interest accompanied also by deep scepticism towards migrants and other people perceived as not only culturally alien but dangerous. (The author's personal archive) They choose names for themselves that they found appropriate or that are pleasing among groups of like-minded persons. They are modern people with a great reverence for the spirituality of the past, making a new religion

from the remnants of the past, which they interpret, adapt, and modify according to modern ways of thinking.

Stanislav (a Neo-Pagan): If people come here for whatever reasons, that means the teaching has become attractive to them. Many say that it would be better if this hadn't happened, that some kind of sectarians come. The truth is that we have a full cross-section of society here, from immature youth to bureaucrats, businessmen and military personnel. Normal, harmonious mutual relationships are being created. (The author's personal archive)

In point of view of the Ynglings, the most detailed, original doctrine was preserved by Slavs and the Iranians. Vedic Ariies mixed with the Indians that caused the doctrine's misrepresentation (so, in particular, Indoariiis asuru are considered not as blami but as evil spirits). According to Aleksander Khinevich, Ynglings respect sacred books of all religions, but the most important are considered the ancient Russian vedic scriptures (Book of Veles, Perun book, Russian Vedas, etc). Despite the absence of original manuscripts for these texts, Ynglings present them as an unquestionable historical source of Slavic antiquity, as well as books of prayers and hymns to ancient gods that could be "put into practice". According to Ynglings, these books were written on a sacral *daar* language, which Khinevich knows alone. Such texts (for example Slavyano-Ariyskie Vedy) are far from being marginal, as several hundred thousand copies are published, thus representing the basis for a certain kind of popular knowledge of ancient history. Besides the Vedas, Ynglings teach their adherents for example „h'Arriiskaya arifmetika" and ancient Slavic grammar. Khinevich dedicates himself to a fairly scholarly study of the ancient text, folklore, archeology, and language, which is believed to contain reliable information about the past of Ynglings community.

The situation that has arisen in Omsk region among Ynglings presents an interesting example of the process of the "invention of a tradition" and the birth of a "new mythology" [4]. For Ynglings, the older the evidence is that gives information about their community of the past, the better. There is a deeper historical question: the issue of whether, in some long-distant time, there may have been an original civilization or cultural complex that was an original source of their ancestors and hence their Pagan religion also. Thus, Ynglings characterize the territory of Omsk oblast as the cradle of the ancient super-civilization Arctida, where the salvation of all of humanity begins. The global and even cosmic aspect of this myth is perceived as having been in operation here for hundreds of millennia, and on a cosmic scale. There is the notion that in ancient times a scientific-spiritual Aryan center called Asgard the Great existed in the area of Omsk, while around 100,000 years ago at the Okunevo site (in Omsk

oblast) there was an Aryan palace (*vimanu*) in the form of a temple, at the top of which a crystal was installed, "intended to be used for holography," through which the Aryans "recorded their consciousness." The temple was destroyed as the result of a certain catastrophe (a flood) [9], and the proto-Aryans abandoned this place, which led to the degradation of culture and religion. The Ynglings think that the intermixing of the proto-Aryans with the Aryans in India led to the distortion of the original teachings, which only the Ynglings preserved in their pure form.

The theory of proto-Aryans origins provides Ynglings with a respectable academic basis for claiming an extremely ancient pedigree for their religious tradition. For this reason, neo-pagans pay a great deal of attention to parallels between Hindu myths, practices, and beliefs and those of their own particular regional traditions. For instance, the place, not far from Omsk, the so-called Yurt-Bergamak area is currently experiencing the spontaneous birth of a new sacral complex, "an ancient Slavic temple (*kapishche*)," which local Neo-Pagans ("The Cultural Heritage and Creativity Commune") view as a burial place of "priestesses" (*zhritsy*) with elongated skulls, and call it the Motherland of Risha, or the Motherland of the White Sages (Seleznev 2011). Thus, we are speaking here of the creation of one more myth about the people of original white race, of which the Russians would be the purest representatives.

In his interview, Khinevich stressed the centrality of strong ethnic ties for Russian identity and discussed the sinful foundation of mixed marriages, which must be forbidden for "true Russians" [6]. In Ynglings doctrine special emphasis is laid on "healthy way of life", which includes such very common features as eating natural and pure food, living responsible and sober life, but also ideas basing on theories of human biology and genetics which are very far from the academic perceptions. According to Khinevich, "the first lover of a woman gives her the form of the Spirit and Blood of his *Rod* and therefore, even if the woman gets later married to another man, her children will genetically be of her first lover. Furthermore, people are designed to live for centuries, but because of the unhealthy and unnatural way of life they nowadays tend to die prematurely. Every extramarital intercourse shortens man's life in three years" [6].

Theories, like that, contribute to a revival of old forms of racism because they pretend to analyze the "essences" of peoples.

## 4. "Religious Conversion": Svarozhichi

The next case focuses on the activity of the Neopagan movement *Svarozhichi* (Official website of the movement Svarozhichi <http://www.svarozhich.net>) in Ekaterinburg (Ural region). This movement is headed by the leader called himself Dobroslav and was founded in the beginning of 2000s. The head of the Svarozhichi, Dobroslav, is not the same person as the late Aleksei Dobrovolskii, another pagan leader, who used the name Dobroslav. Svarozhichi are also highly interested in understanding Pagan traditions of the past, but they don't fill bound, as do Aleksander Khinevich, to the past religious traditions of a specific region as their ultimate frame of reference [11]; instead, they see the tradition only as gateway into deeper spiritual experience. At this suggests, Svarozhichi don't dedicate themselves to an intensive study or reconstruction of the past of Pagan tradition of a particular region. The community exists as a secret order and many of members of community prefer not to advertise their affiliations with native belief. The absence of frequent press stories about them might suggest these groups are largely ignored by the authorities.

The pantheon of Svarozhichi is not unified (veneration of Vles, Perun, Dajbog or Khors), but a special attention is paid to Svaroh (the god Svaroh contains elements of sky and solar deities known from other Indo-European-speaking peoples). Svarozhichi think that the Cyrillic alphabet, in particular the liturgical, ancient Slavonic, is endowed with a transcendent reality. Svarozhichi's views are based on the idea of a trinity, whereby *Iav* (the visible world), *Nav* (the world of beyond), and *Prav* (the world of laws) represent different levels of reality. Eschatological patterns are predominant in their discourse, they think that mankind is on the road to ruin because it denies religious values for material benefit.

The texts and songs, which disseminated among Svarozhichi, assert that the national heritage – Slavonic will be found in the preservation of an Aryan identity. They consider the Christianization of the Kievian Rus' by Prince Vladimir in 988 as the beginning of decadence. The subsequent millennium of Russian history, then, is presented as 1,000 years of slow domination of Jews over the Russian people, and the enslavement of Russia for the service of foreign interests. Svarozhichi's discourse, like the Slavophile discourses of the first half of the nineteenth century, systematically present the Slavs as the first people of humanity, existing for several thousand, if not tens of thousands of years. According to Svarozhichi, the lack of knowledge of this reality within the realm of classical historiography can be explained by conspiracy theories: since antiquity, the



West has been attempting to deny the value of the Slavic civilization and to dissimulate it under a diverse terminology.

As an Internet fora of Svarozhichi shows, they argued that the first Aryans, and therefore future Russians, would have created powerful civilization in Siberia (considering this region as a geographical heart of Arian continent) or in the steppe area stretching between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea. The second place has the reference to the Scythians as the matrix element of Slavs ancient history. Another nationalist use of place and archeological discovery was related with Arkaim in Chelyabinsk region. Many disciples of new religious movements characterized this place as the capital of the ancient Russo-Aryan civilization, pretending that Zarathustra had lived there. Today some members of Svarozhichi community of different educational and social background play an important role in spreading such discourses. On the Internet forums of Svarozhichi, many works with Vedic references by the first doctrinarians, like Yuri Miroliubov or Sergey Lesnoi, as well as those of their contemporary disciples, are in circulation. Some bloggers among Svarozhichi are known for their links with the radical right ideology, others participate in presenting the book of Vles as an authentic manuscript or take part in conversations praising of the prestigious Aryan past of the Russians.

Svarozhichi appropriate ancient Russian cult traditions of the earth mother by claiming that the Slavs, children of the forest, will be the first to rediscover harmony with nature. They wear special clothes (Slavic tunics and head-bands) for religious feasts, replace foreign words with Slavic equivalents (*svetopisi* instead of *fotografii*, *izvedy* instead of *interv'iu*).

Rituals play a significant role in the involvement of participants, in the articulations of shared meanings and the formulation of new community ties (magical practices connected to the sanctification of water, fire, and cereal grains). The anthropologist Sarah M. Pike stated: "Neopagan identity is primarily expressed as festivals trough music and dance" [8]. The festivals of Svarozhichi are generally linked with the annual cycle of seasons; the summer and winter solstices, as the longest and shortest days of the annual cycle, are widely celebrated holidays. These religious practices can be called *reconstructionist* one, because they mix and match old, traditional elements with new ideas and practices from other resources.

For example, the ritual Veneration of Ancient Russian Knights is organized in May of the 9th in honour of the victory of Prince Svyatoslav in the battle with Hazars. The sense of this ritual is closely related with attracting to Slavic ideas of new member as well as, the whole generations of families. Svarozhichi regard these festivals as

better established, more authoritative, and more authentic than those that are newly created or vaguely imagined. Such symbols as a trident and objects representing fire are prominent as is the repetitive refrain of "Glory to Svarog! Glory to Slavs!" Ritual of veneration is celebrated with a traditional folksinging, bonfire jumping, circle and spiral dancing. They pray also to the symbol of the swastika as a representation of the sun. They have also rehabilitated some warrior codes inspired from the Cossack traditions. (The author's personal archive.)

## 5. Conclusion

The Neo-pagan movements in Ural and Western Siberia fully correspond to the constructivist viewpoint of the development of religious consciousness in contemporary epoch. Paganistic national visions are based on a unique interpretation of ethnic proto-history, a strong commitment to non-Christian, "ancient" roots of ethnic culture and a spiritual concept of the nation.

1. Neo-pagan nationalism strengthens religious aspects of nationalism. The characteristic spiritual features (concepts of divine electivity, group beliefs of national peculiarity, norms of national unity, concepts of sacred history and sacred destiny) represent a complex frame for the political appropriation of contemporary spirituality. Neo-pagan nationalism in Russia advocates a conception of Slavs unity based on Aryan identity and the willingness to give up Christianity, which is deemed responsible for two thousand years of identity aberrations;
2. Rituals of neo-pagans play a significant role in the participants' involvement, in the articulations of shared meanings and the formulation of new communities. Native faith movements are not based merely on ideologies and mythical constructs; religious practice and spiritual experiences are not less significant;
3. Neopagan movements are revival movements, which aim the cultural purification of their national culture from non-native as well as western elements. Beliefs in a (national-and-pagan) golden age, which existed before the political and spiritual corruption of the nation, before the age, when old mores were exterminated and substituted for "alien" ones, are salient among pagan sympathizers today also;
4. Based upon these foundations an "anti-discourse" is being formulated. State identity in this context is appeared to be "non-emotional" identity, political construct, which juxtaposes it's with an ideological concept. As for neo-pagans, ethnic tradition, a strong emphasis blood, and the imagined pre-Christian native

faith retains the emotional attachment of its adherents in constructing the collective identity of our time.

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