

Vocation, Mission, Profession

Vernacular experts in the context of alternative spirituality in Europe

An international online conference at the Department of Ethnology
and Cultural Anthropology, Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana
organized by Mirjam Mencej and Judit Kis-Halas

14 May
2021



HEA

Designed by K.H.E.

Programme

9.00-9.15

Welcome addresses by Jaka Repič, head of Dept. Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology, Judit Kis-Halas on behalf of the organisers

9.15-9.45

Bužeková, Tatiana (Slovakia) Shamanic gift in the global village: Spiritual energy and biomedicine

9.45-10.15

Aleknaite, Egle (Lithuania) Healing self or others: Understanding a shamanic mission in contemporary Lithuanian shamanic milieu

10.15-10.45

Hiimäe, Reet (Estonia) Sweatlodges, spirit animals, dream-catchers: appropriations of Native American spiritual concepts in Estonia

10.45-11.00: *Break*

11.00-11.30

Radulović, Nemanja (Serbia) Magic roots of Serbian New Age: Ž. M. Slavinski

11.30-12.00

Račič, Manca (Slovenia) “The guardian of the most astonishing secrets”: Life and work of Pavel Medvešček-Klančar

12.00-12.15: *Break*

12.15-12.45

Jiga-Iliescu, Laura (Romania) Sleeping and meditating at a healing stone cross: A case study from the Danube shore

12.45-13.15

Kõiva, Mare (Estonia) Mixing tradition, esoteric views and personal experiences

13.15-13.30: *Break*

13.30-14.00

Teissenhoffer, Viola (Czechia) Becoming a “spiritual teacher”: Crafting cosmologies and rituals in contemporary pagan revival in Hungary

14.00-14.30

Kis-Halas, Judit (Slovenia) Female leadership, healing powers and charismatic authority in Hungarian neopagan subcultures

14.30-15.15 *Lunch break*

15.15-16.00: Students' presentations

Krašovic, Tina (Slovenia) "Now I recognize it had all been a manipulation" The stories of those who left the *Healthy Atmosphere*, a spiritual school of morality: A case study from Domžale and Celje, (Slovenia)

Sosič, Katarina (Slovenia) Crystals and their power between social media, entrepreneurship and personal growth: A case study of a spiritual entrepreneur

Zlatović, Nataša (Slovenia) Epistemological approach to unity of body, soul and mind in modern shamanic healing practices: A case study

16.00: Closing comments

Abstracts

Eglė Aleknaitė (Lithuania)

Healing Self or Others: Understanding a Shamanic Mission in Contemporary Lithuanian Shamanic Milieu

The Lithuanian shamanic milieu consists of several interconnected communities that follow various shamanic traditions and attract people with diverse needs and interests, as well as diverse understanding of shamanic practice and a mission of a shamanic practitioner. In the milieu, people seek to solve personal crises, to heal physical ailments, to boost spiritual development and power both through using services of shamanic practitioners and by becoming shamans themselves. Based on observation of gatherings of four Lithuanian shamanic groups, the presentation focuses on narratives of healing and their role in communicating a mission of shamanic practitioners and in constructing shamanic practices, communities and subjects in Lithuania. What are themes of the narratives? Who narrates them, in what contexts, for what audiences? What functions do these narratives perform? Individualistic ethos predominates in the milieu, but narratives of healing point to significance of community and relational modes of shamanic spirituality.

Tatiana Bužeková (Slovakia)

Shamanic gift in the global village: Spiritual energy and biomedicine

Neo-shamanism or urban shamanism is a movement which concentrates on spiritual healing and aims to revive traditional shamanism. The aim of the paper is to explore legitimation of charismatic neo-shamanic healers in relation to biomedicine which is a dominant authoritative body of medical knowledge in European societies. The paper presents the results of the ethnographic research on two neo-shamanic groups operating in Slovakia. In neo-shamanism, the shaman's abilities are represented either as learned skills, or a special spiritual gift. The latter is characteristic of charismatic persons within neo-shamanic groups. I base my argument on the understanding of charisma as rhetoric and investigate discursive strategies of two charismatic healers who belong to different kinds of neo-shamanic groups. Both support the view that the shamanic practices are compatible with biomedicine; however, they represent this compatibility in different ways. I argue that the rhetoric in legitimation of the shamanic gift corresponds to particular social settings and cultural background of a healer. It is manifested in the use of the concept of energy which serves as a bridge between spiritual healing and the natural sciences.

Reet Hiimäe (Estonia)

Sweatlodges, spirit animals, dream-catchers: appropriations of Native American spiritual concepts in Estonia

Esoteric teachings and rituals connected with Native American cultures reached Estonia in 1990ies (to a limited extent even earlier) when organizing of shamanistic camps started in smaller circles. However, in the recent decade several concepts (e.g. sweat lodge rituals, sacred tobacco, spirit-animals, dream-catchers) have obtained wider visibility through the media. Although Estonian contemporary spirituality contains hybrid forms that have blurred boundaries between various shamanic traditions, contemporary New Age spirituality and traditional Estonian folk religion, there are beliefs and rituals that their practitioners relate namely to Native American religious traditions. Based on personal experience narratives about participating in rituals and ceremonies, and some case analyses of narratives about obtaining the role of a shaman or a spiritual leader, my paper analyses the reception of Native American rituals and symbols in Estonia – their adaptations and modifications, interactions between their subcultural and mainstream use. The paper concludes that the use of elements from Native American religiosity in Estonia can be seen as an example of integrated and appropriated contemporary spirituality that can have various functions from simply aesthetic material outputs to psychological self help and identity building, supporting personal belonging and life-history narrating.

Laura Jiga Iliescu (Romania)

Sleeping and meditating at a healing stone cross: A case study from the Danube shore

My proposal for this workshop is part of a research in progress dealing with divinatory dreams that occur in certain holy places, and which require a previous pilgrimage. As a study case, I choose the Dervent Christian monastery, due to its huge potential of exploring contemporary expressions of religiosities that articulate *old* and postmodern beliefs and attitudes toward sacredness, toward the healthy/ill status of the body and soul, and toward dreams and dreaming activities, which all go beyond the canonical prescriptions of a certain religious confession or ethnicity. Dervent's walls, legends and devotional rituals grew (and still grow) as a unit almost impossible to sprain, around two stone crosses assigned with healing power: one for humans and another for animals. The first one is settled inside an oratory inbuilt in the church, and represents the object of my interest here.

The first attestation of the practice of sleeping for therapeutic reasons on the spot marked by the stone cross comes from 1903. Soon, local inhabitants built a small roof above it, since more and more Christians (Romanians, Bulgarians) and Muslims (as attested by testimonies and

photos) came there, some spending the night at its bottom. Hence, in the beginning there was the healing stone cross and the popular (both Christian and Muslim!) therapeutic and devotional practices of praying, sleeping, dreaming and sharing dreams, and only afterward the church and the monastery, who enclosed and „confiscated” the stone cross, but who still works as a site for multireligious shared experiences.

This time I will focus on the actor(s) involved in the therapeutic scenario as religious and spiritual authorities – monks, medical doctors and healing practitioners using “bioenergy” – and the legendary files fabricated around them.

Mare Kõiva (Estonia)

Mixing tradition, esoteric views and personal experiences

The presentation explores the fusion of local folklore as part of the wider spiritual system, the adaptation to the rituals of lived religion, such as core shamanism, the rituals and movements of nature religion, as well as courses in the use of incantations. In Estonian, prayer and charm/spell are linguistically close terms, and in folk tradition, official prayers, excerpts of hymns are often used in the composition or in the function of a spell. Health schools and courses teach people to change their world, communicate through their own created spells, create an incantation for yourself. Different forces and self-balancing techniques are important in those texts, prayer or ritual is used as cognitive behavioural therapy, which allows you to take care of your inner experience, do away with disturbing thoughts and focus on positive thoughts and relationships. Some of the courses carry the idea that lessons like shamanistic rituals and other exercises can be delivered in a place of importance: “A person needs to find a place for themselves that you can go to without someone taking your time away so that you can concentrate.” Such experiences include exchanging and prioritizing personal experience narratives, which is important in the context of living religion.

Judit Kis-Halas (Slovenia)

Female leadership, healing powers and charismatic authority in Hungarian neopagan subcultures

Native faith in Hungary has been usually a “male business” since its very beginnings in the late 1980’s. During the past decade, however, the emergence of female spiritual figures could be seen. These “wise women” seem to be active in the more globalized and less ethnic currents in the neopagan scene.

Drawn on ethnographical research and interviews the paper introduces the activity of female spiritual leaders in present day Hungary. Building on the respective ethnographical-archival material it highlights the gender aspect by comparing the Hungarian data with similar phenomena from Slovenia and Croatia. It also poses the question whether the progress of female spiritual leaders reflects a feminist turn in the cultic milieu of present-day Hungary and the neighbouring countries.

Tina Krašovic (Slovenia)

“Now I recognize it had all been a manipulation” The stories of those who left the *Healthy Atmosphere*, a spiritual school of morality: A case from Domžale and Celje, (Slovenia)

The presentation focuses on individuals who left the *Healthy Atmosphere* - a group that presents itself as a spiritual school of morality that draws from early Christian teachings. The centralized group, led by a spiritual leader, has a single belief system, accepted and supported by all its members. On the one hand, this presentation argues that a charismatic authoritarian leader uses specific methods (for instance group and individual therapies, teachings about evil with the use of conspiracy theories, determining sexual relationships and partnerships, controlling an individual's entire social network) to gain total control over the members of a group. On the other hand, it presents how his methods conditioned members' decision to leave the group and has since had a profound impact on their on-going traumatic experiences. It also briefly addresses some methodological problems, related to the search for interlocutors, willing to share their troubled stories.

Manca Račič (Slovenia)

Life and work of Pavel Medvešček-Klančar: “The guardian of the most astonishing secrets”

Pavel Medvešček-Klančar (1933–2020) presented Slovenian native faith (also known as *staroverstvo*) to the wider Slovenian public in two of his most important manuscripts: *Flight into the Shadow of the Moon: Tales of Old Beliefs* (2006), and *From the Invisible Cardinal Direction* (2015). *Staroverstvo* is repeatedly described by its believers as a “way of [everyday] life”, thus as a religion that was/is lived. Medvešček being the first person to explore the above-mentioned religious practice systematically and with complete dedication, could therefore stand as its foremost vernacular expert. The presentation will focus on how Medvešček collected the material, and why

his writings sow doubts about credibility and authenticity among Slovenian folklorists, ethnologists, and anthropologists.

Nemanja Radulović (Serbia)

Ž. M. Slavinski: Magic roots of Serbian New Age

New Age has reached Serbia through many different channels since the 1960s onwards. I would like to focus on a rather neglected root of it, which stems from engagement with ritual magic and offshoots of Thelemic affiliations. Therefore I will introduce Živorad Mihajlović Slavinski (1937), the most influential figure of Serbian magical and New Age scene. Starting from the 1980s up to the present Slavinski has created many self-help techniques explained in his books and offered at his workshops. Their outlook can be described as typical of New Age in many ways. However, in 1970 Slavinski became an author and leader in tradition of ritual magic, derived from The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn at first place. He founded a magical group (White Gnostic Church) whose affiliations come from different Thelemic sources (M. Bertiaux, K. Grant). It was probably the most influential one in ex-Yugoslavia. Slavinski became the leading figure of the occult scene and a guru for many younger people. The mythology provided by him was of distinctively Gnostic character. At some point he turned away from the magical worldview in favour of Scientology-influenced psychological methods. Or it could be formulated that his psychological, self-help techniques are essentially magic techniques updated. In this presentation I will try to give Slavinski's portrayal hoping to comprehend the shift from magic and Neo-Gnostic teaching toward holistic New Age worldview. This neglected background reveals the complexity of New Age sources and their very character.

Sosič, Katarina (Slovenia)

Crystals and their power between social media, entrepreneurship and personal growth: A case study of a spiritual entrepreneur

In this presentation, I will attempt to examine the beliefs and practices of a spiritual entrepreneur (spiritual both in the sense, that she is an entrepreneur, who considers herself to be a spiritual person, and that her business itself is rooted in her spiritual beliefs), whose business and beliefs are centred around crystals. I will look at her beliefs related to crystals and their power, as well as the ways in which her business of making them into jewellery, has contributed to the development of these beliefs (and vice versa). I will be paying special attention to the role of social media, as they are both the scene where the majority of her work takes place, and the important source of inspiration of her beliefs.

Viola Teisenhoffer (Czechia)

Becoming a “spiritual teacher”: Crafting cosmologies and rituals in contemporary pagan revival in Hungary

This paper will present the first results of a series of life-path interviews carried out in the frame of an ongoing ethnographic research on the phenomenon of “re-enchantment” in Hungary. Focusing on a well-known leader in the Neopagan milieu, who identifies himself as a “spiritual teacher”, I will discuss three issues that appear to be fundamental in understanding the construction of expertise in this context: (1) The different practices he experienced in the course of his becoming a (Lakota sweat lodges and Sun Dances, core shamanism, training with two heirs of what is held in this milieu as Hungarian pre-Christian religion); (2) The way he combines “Western” and “Eastern” forms of Neopaganism in the practices he creates (a shamanic school, an entirely new healing technique); (3) The family background and personal historical experience that led him to engage in the (re)construction of pre-Christian religious traditions and beliefs that appeal mostly to persons ascribing to conservative-nationalist values.

Zlatović, Nataša (Slovenia)

Epistemological approach to unity of body, soul and mind in modern shamanic healing practices: A case study

In this paper I will briefly present gendered modern shamanic practices based on the case study of one of its attendees.

I argue that the position of alternative healing practices in the modern system of beliefs is ideologically influenced and shaped from the inside by neoliberal form of consumption and production; the result is a commodification of beliefs as well as the commodification of knowledge related to shamanic healing sessions. The type of knowledge that attendees gain through various sessions is closely tied with the idea of self-improvement, searching for meaning, and finding one’s truth but most of all, the possibility of discovering authentic identity through that process with successful guidance from “knowledge-holder” – shaman.

Following that, self-analysis, letting go of ego, logical mind, and connection with one’s own body become the dominant narrative of this practice, forming the unity of body, soul, and mind.