

Neo-Pagan Youth Groups in Saint Petersburg Russia

Abstract

Literature to date on the neo-Pagan movement in Russia has focused on understanding the movement as a form of “escape” and evaluating the relative “harm” posed to individuals and society by such organisations. This research focused on the everyday manifestation and reproduction of Slavic neo-Pagan groups in St. Petersburg. The research suggested that, as the Slavic neo-Pagan movement struggled to establish an agreed set of principles and practices, disagreements focused on the relative weight of its ideological and cultural components and that particular communities of neo-Pagans had become organised around their position in relation to these discourses.

Keywords: xenophobia, drug use, youth, subculture, neo-Paganism

Introduction

Current academic literature on the question of Paganism might be broadly defined as adopting one of two approaches. The first envisages Paganism as one tendency within a wider sphere of New religious movements by which it is meant that such religious or spiritual groups have emerged relatively recently or have not been recognised publicly as distinct denominations, churches or religions (Barker, 1997). The second approach interprets Paganism as a branch of the New-Age movement, where New-Age is understood as a particular constellation of various occult groups which emerged as a movement for the revival of spirituality, esoteric traditions and the revision of established views. Paganism, from this viewpoint, is characterised by syncretism and the belief in the unity of science, mysticism and religion (Kanterov, 2006). Common to both these approaches is the understanding of the attraction of Paganism as lying in the desire to escape the reality of the everyday contemporary world. Much of this literature consists of descriptions regarding reasons for such an “escape”, various Pagan groups themselves, the form and depth of the “escape”

into groups, the relative potential harm to society such movements present and the acceptability of individual choices to join such groups.

In contrast to this emerging body of literature, the research conducted for SAL moved away from the centrality of the notion of “escape” to consider the mechanisms of the reproduction of the logic concerning the everyday lives of people identifying themselves as Pagans. This shift of focus allowed researchers to explore new questions in the field such as how and why particular elements of traditional and sacred knowledge (be they practices or speech forms) become normatively accepted while others are rendered unacceptable. The understanding of neo-Paganism adopted for this research was that it constitutes a form of polytheism by which, in part, various kinds of historical, traditional and cultural forms (knowledge, perceptions, practices, bodily forms) and images of the sacred are learned, re-thought, given new meaning and reproduced.

Methods

One six-week period of fieldwork was conducted in Spring 2008. Access to the group was gained through existing contacts in St. Petersburg and contacts provided by scene members in other cities. Prior to the commencement of fieldwork, a survey of the media coverage and self-presentation of the groups (especially via the Internet) was conducted. This also facilitated initial contacts – for example in the case of the neo-Pagan case study – through chat forums. In all cases, snowballing was used to generate new respondents from contacts provided by key informants. The main methodological techniques employed for gathering data for these case studies were:

- web-site analysis
- ethnographic observation
- recorded interviews with respondents
- researcher diaries
- visual mappings of urban space used by the groups employing still and video photography.

A total of 14 interviews and one fieldwork diary were analysed in this case study.

Results

Group-society relations

In Russian society, neo-Paganism is a marginal discourse in relation to monotheism. This is manifested in the fact that the Russian Orthodox Church treats neo-Pagans

even more negatively than it does members of religious sects. Informants reported that they often concealed their views for fear of evoking a negative reaction, being ridiculed or simply not being understood appropriately. The prefix “neo” is thus adopted in this research to describe members of neo-Pagan communities in order to indicate linguistically the significance of the discursive construction of the movement in contemporary Russia. Talking about the direct reproduction of Paganism (in contrast to other contemporary religions like Judaism, Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism, Lamaism, Sintoism or Brahmanism) in contemporary Russia is impossible due to the dominant culture of monotheism whose hegemony is underpinned by the maintenance of a particular understanding and structuring of traditional and sacred knowledge.

Intra-group relations

Although neo-Paganism is very internally diverse, this research focused, from the outset, on Slavic neo-Pagans (see Gaidukov, n.d.). Thus the research related to Slavic and Scandinavian forms of neo-Paganism as well as to followers of Wicca.¹ This focus facilitated the understanding of how the different meanings attached to neo-Paganism had engendered a discursive confrontation over the establishment of the principles of normative neo-Paganism both in general as well as within particular branches of it (Slavic, Scandinavian and Wicca).

The analysis of Slavic neo-Pagan websites conducted for this research² suggests that Slavic neo-Paganism falls into two broad categories. The first – the cultural branch of the movement – is oriented towards the history of the Slavs of Ancient Rus, their culture, daily life, traditions and the reconstruction of Pagan rituals and holidays. The second group of websites, in addition to containing information on the history and rituals of neo-Paganism, also carry literature of a nationalist, revisionist and racially-oriented kind. This was particularly evident from the exploration of linked sites which almost always contained not only neo-Pagan references but also fascist and nationalist materials. Thus organisations and communities whose leaders and representatives openly demonstrated nationalist views were considered to constitute a second, ideological branch of Slavic neo-Paganism.

The results of the analysis of the informational space of Slavic neo-Paganism were confirmed by interviews with neo-Pagans and discussions within their groups.

1 Wicca is derived from the “synthesis of eastern magical rituals and a series of books on European witchcraft. ... At the heart of Wicca ethics is the principle, ‘Do what you want as long as it harms no-one’. ... The movement consists of small groups (covens) who gather twice per month (at new moon and half way through the lunar cycle). They also celebrate a series of ancient Celtic festivals (Halloween, Beltane etc.)” (Falikhov, 1999, p. 104).

2 A total of 38 neo-Pagan sites were studied prior to commencing the fieldwork.

This suggested that, as the Slavic neo-Pagan movement struggled to establish an agreed set of principles and practices, disagreement focused around the relative weight of its ideological and cultural components. At the current point in time, it is the ideological branch of Slavic neo-Paganism which dominates. This is evident from the representation of neo-Paganism in the public sphere (media, Internet) and specifically its dominance in claims on the “true” understanding of historical, cultural and sacred knowledge.

On the level of everyday practice, this discursive struggle was an important element in the positioning of individual subjects within the group as this respondent makes clear:

Respondent: Religion – as a way of life – was what interested me. I was more oriented towards the spiritual aspect. I bought the relevant literature and read it. I found people of a like mind to talk to via the Internet – met with them once or twice. We discussed common interests and after some time – 2 or 3 months – we set up our society, completely separate from politics, from everything. We discuss only issues relating to traditions. Not a whiff of nationalism. Far from it.

Interviewer: Do you mean in your group or more generally?

Respondent: We never cooperate with organisations which politicise it all – but there are many of those kinds of organisations, even in Petersburg. So we make a clear distinction. So that’s how we formed basically – we determined our ideas and principles and the frameworks within which we wanted to work, made sure we were clear about them. In particular we don’t want anything to do with politics and what I mentioned. That’s it basically. The main members are all right here in front of you – bar five or six people who can’t make it every day. (M., Scandinavian Pagan)

Thus the rupture between the ideological and cultural discourses of neo-Paganism means that particular communities of neo-Pagans become organised around their position in relation to these discourses.

Conclusions

At its current stage of development, Slavic neo-Paganism in St. Petersburg falls into two broad categories – a cultural branch of the movement oriented towards the history of the Slavs of Ancient Rus’, their culture, daily life, traditions and the reconstruction of Pagan rituals and holidays and an ideological branch which propagates nationalist, revisionist and racially-oriented worldviews. This division is central to the self-identification of individual neo-Pagans and neo-Pagan groups and prevents any agreed set of principles and practices for the movement being established. It also makes the movement vulnerable to criticism from within the dominant culture.

Policy recommendations

There are several factors which differentiate neo-Pagan companies. The first are role games, reconstructionism. The second are different types of mystical practices, symbols and rhetoric. Among outside influences, the important one is the influence of the symbolic and historical heritage of the city. From the historical point of view, there is a wide field for role and reconstructionist movements. Images of St. Petersburg as a living entity are widespread in literature, and this fact shapes the mystical practices, symbols and rhetoric of the company's members.

There are two key places for the spatial localisation of a company – the *kapishche* (place for rituals and worships) in the city and temporary, tented stands organised for different events. Both can be replaced territorially but remain as important places. In both cases, the symbolic core of these places is the opportunity to communicate and exchange information, experiences and knowledge.

Private space is not only place of residence for the company's members but also the webpage on the site, vkontakte.ru. Everyone has more than 30 friends there. That means the numbers of friends are growing, especially after events.

Companies arise around the most active and experienced participants. A factor defining leadership is the so-called “uncivilised”, meaning the rejection of norms and ethic rules of the wider society. The second key factor is the level of spiritual development or deepness of world understanding on positions of existing cult forms or on an individually-developed worldview.

Males are quite masculine. Females are defined according to their attractiveness. If a person is subscribed in the category of beauty, that person gets the most attention. A person gets the most protection if that person belongs to the group.

Young women are quite a specific combination of features. From one side, they are very independent. From another side, they become very feminine when taking on an old-fashioned role. But they still remain active.

From the point of role gamers and reconstructivists, a man is warrior, and a woman is a girlfriend of a warrior. The active position is ascribed to the warrior. From a mystical view, both a man and a woman are strong. Gender doesn't restrict the ability to understand life.

A unifying factor in the company is the reading of fantasy and historical literature. Alcohol is widespread in the company but it is not abused; many smoke.

In the context of tolerance towards various forms of difference in the youth sphere, it is important to note that neo-Paganism is considered by the authorities not as a subcultural identity but as a non-normative religious practice. Moreover practising neo-Paganism is not only labelled non-normative, but concrete actions are taken to destroy the places in which representatives of neo-Pagan communities

gather. Specifically, in the city of St. Petersburg, a temple (where people meet and pray) was cleared of sacred monuments (idols):

Respondent: I remember it really well although I don't remember who did it. [They said] we cannot allow hostility between religions so, in place of this foul Pagan temple, we are going to construct a sacred Orthodox church. This will make sure there is no hostility. This, they said, is what we will build.

Interviewer: And had this temple always been there?

Respondent: How do you mean, 'always'? At first it was the Triglav, the Triglav Temple – [Triglav is] another of the deities, one of the gods of war really, of the military gods, Pagan ones. That's how it was. They were building a temple, some Tajiks came as construction workers, and the cops rounded up the Tajiks ... and took them away on the orders of Mrs. Markova, or maybe not Markova. I don't remember; probably it was Mrs Markova. (M., neo-Pagan, 29-year old)

The official reasons given by the authorities for pulling down the temple and removing property registered as belonging to a voluntary organisation from the square were twofold:

1. The neo-Pagans had seized the land without permission.
2. The rituals conducted at the temple had raised questions; information had been received that they bore a nationalistic and extremist character.

The temple was transferred by the priest (*zhrets*) and Pagan followers to another place not far from the original one and it is now operational there. In this sense, the measures taken had no lasting effect. Moreover, it is important not to forget that Slavic Pagan communities are characterised by Russophile and xenophobic sentiments. In this particular case, this is evident from the fact that the leader of the Slavic Pagan community has xenophobic views and accepts skinheads into Paganism. This can be seen as providing support to the nationalistic skinhead movement. However, it would be a mistake to think that the eradication of places of meeting and prayer by the authorities will change this situation. On the basis of the research conducted, we can state that it would be more effective to offer discursive and socio-cultural support to groups and individuals who interpret and engage with Slavic Paganism such as:

1. A form of spiritual development

Respondent: So it is all connected to the forest, to natural forces. The forests generally are really ... the cult of trees is particularly well-developed. Of course then it all got tied up with power and so on. ... But at the start, it was like that.

Interviewer: And what is it for you?

Respondent: For me it is inspiration. ... I was at art school and, at some point, someone told me that there was a Celtic Festival called The May Tree in Vyborg. When you get to this May Tree, it turns out they have everything there. There's Ancient Rome and everything you could want. Teutonic knights in armour. And the only thing left of the Celts is the May Tree ritual and the ribbons. So not much really. But even so, it's like a core around which

this can grow. I really believe in natural forces. This is something really significant for me. [M., neo-Pagan, 29-year old]

2. The reconstruction of historic or ancient practices

There are individuals who come consciously. ... Those who want to learn the culture join the folklorists. In the folk music clubs, the girls [learn] dancing and singing. And when we get together and get going, it's marvellous. They have their songs, and we have our games. They celebrate *Kupala* [summer solstice] beautifully – it's such a great event. (M., neo-Pagan, 30-year old)

In this vein, it is important to give those interested the opportunity to work in local history museums so that their practices and methods become not only an individual hobby but an important socio-cultural activity. Of course one problem here is that the subcultural status of neo-Pagans means that they often prefer their own spaces and places and try to avoid incorporation into existing cultural institutions. This might be addressed by seeking to create places where they can realise their interest in the past in new ways. Indeed there is some indication that the development of new forms and spaces for expression might meet approval from below. For example, currently, participation in large scale fight reconstructions is being challenged within the movement as a result of a number of serious injuries.

Respondent: ... Two people ended up disabled after just 15 minutes of fighting, not even 15. But that's exceptional. Usually you get away with just broken bones and bruises. Getting the edge of a shield in your face is pretty normal. I have had teeth knocked out three times. And that happened last time even though at last I had a concealed mask on.

Interviewer: What is a concealed mask?

Respondent: Well you see Russian helmets are mainly not European. I mean they are not like [European ones]. The European type is a like a pot with slits for the eyes, whereas a Russian helmet is open. This is because the Russians usually fought with peoples from the Steppe. We fought Europeans less. When you fight with people from the Steppe, you need to see into the distance, the Steppe. If you are wearing a tin can like that, then you can't see anything; you have no peripheral vision. You'd be killed three times over before you located anybody. So for that reason, the helmets were kept as simple as possible. And since we are into reconstruction and not fantasy, we make real helmets but try to sneak into there as much mask as possible to keep as many teeth as possible whole. It's expensive to replace teeth. I found that out for myself. (M., neo-Pagan, 30-year old)

This growing disaffection with fighting as the main group activity might be used as a starting point for switching the main activity to mastering the art of fighting, by replacing actual fighting with an effective demonstration of fighting instruments and skills.

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Santrauka

Mokslinė literatūra, analizuojanti neopagonių judėjimą Rusijoje, iki šiol daugiausia dėmesio skyrė judėjimo, kaip socialinio eskapizmo (angl. *escape*), analizei ir santykinės tokių judėjimų keliamos „žalos“ asmenims ir visuomenei įvertinimui. Šis tyrimas susitelkia į kasdienę slavų neopagonių grupių saviraišką ir jų „reprodukciją“ Sankt Peterburge. Atvejo studija atlikta remiantis stebėjimu, grupių svetainių analize, 14 giluminių interviu ir vienu tyrėjo dienoraščiu. Tyrėjai nustatė, kad Sankt Peterburgo slavų neopagonių judėjimas turi dvi šakas. Kultūrinė šio judėjimo šaka nukreipta į senosios Rusios slavų istoriją, jų kultūrą, kasdienybės papročius, tradicijas, ritualų rekonstrukciją; ideologinė šaka propaguoja nacionalizmą, rasistinius požiūrius. Šios skirtingos vertybės yra atskirų slavų pagonių grupių tapatybės formavimo pagrindas. Toks judėjimo pasidalijimas sąlygoja visuomenės kritiką, kelia grupių tarpusavio nesutarimus.

Tyrėjai pateikia rekomendacijas valdymo sferoje dirbantiems visuomenės veikėjams, kuriose atskleidžia pagrindinius grupės narių elgesio bruožus, jų interesus bei siūlo grupių narių socialinės integracijos galimybes.

Raktažodžiai: ksenofobija, narkotikų vartojimas, jaunimas, subkultūra, neopagonybė.