

# Vedic Slavism as an Intersection Between Alternative Spirituality and Religion

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This study, with the help of combined research methods, focuses on the analysis of the activities of groups claiming to be Vedic Slavs in Slovakia. Although these groups lay claim to a unified basis – the published canon of the Slavic-Aryan Vedas – they show considerable differences in the interpretations and applications of this doctrine. Currently, they also show certain similarities in their organization, namely, unclear institutionalization and unclear boundaries between religion and spirituality. The results of this research thus confirm the validity of the theory of social theorists about the blurring of the boundaries between spirituality and religiosity even in the Slovak alternative religious milieu.

*Keywords:* Vedic Slavism, alternative spirituality, institutionalized religiosity, dimensions of religiosity

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## Introduction

The main topic of this study is the movement of the Slavic-Aryan Vedas, as a specific school of thought, which (as one of the possibilities) currently fills the gap or blurs the boundaries between spirituality and religion.

The movement of the Slavic-Aryan Vedas (with the official name Ancient Inglise Church of the Old Believers – Inglise, rus. Древнерусская Инглистическая Церковь Православных Староверов—Инглингов – *Drevnerusskaya Ynglisticheskaya Cerkov Pravoslavnykh Staroverov Ynglingov*), is a relatively new religious movement. It

was created in 1992 in the Russian Federation, specifically in the Siberian city of Omsk, and is based on the ideas presented in the holy books of the so-called Slavic-Aryan Vedas. It began to appear in Slovakia after 2000, and the ideas of the Slavic-Aryan Vedas became more widely known after 2005 through the website [www.tartaria.sk](http://www.tartaria.sk).

Inglism (Vedic Slavism) draws from various religious and spiritual ideologies (Hinduism, paganism, etc.) and elements of New Age esoteric teachings. The ideological basis of the movement appears to be neo-pagan,<sup>1</sup> but this movement presents itself as an original religion of the Indo-European peoples.

In Slovakia, this movement acts as a civil association (associations). At the moment (2022), it does not have a fixed structure and is rather a loose association of sympathizers. Its activities are currently focused more on 'missionary activities', the organization of lectures and seminars.

The very name of the movement is already problematic because until now there has been no 'officially codified' name for this community. In the initial stages of its existence, its proponents in Slovakia adopted the Russian version – Inglingi. However, this name was soon abandoned because the movement does not have a fixed organizational structure, and thus the word 'church' was inappropriate. Currently, these groups use no official name but often refer to the teachings and practices as 'our'. The generally accepted name is Slavjanstvo (a synonym of Inglism), or the more practical name 'Vedic culture', which refers to the antiquity of the teachings.

In the introductory part of this article, I define the theoretical framework, based on the work of social theorists who claim that such a change is a natural development of postmodern religiosity. In the next part, I present the ethnography of individual groups and then analyze two dimensions through a parsimonious model of religion – practice and membership – which reveals tendencies towards the institutionalization or privatization of religion.

## Theoretical Framework

In the 1990s, following the fall of the communist regime, Slovakia was exposed to Western-style modernization and Westernization of its values and material culture, which affected the change in morals, values, and lifestyle. In addition to the reinstallation of 'traditional churches' into public life, society witnessed the opening of the religious market and the pluralization of religious and spiritual offers.

The primary problem in connection with alternative religiosity is how to define the traditional version in the Central European geopolitical space, which is characterized by the strong dominance of Christian churches, especially the Catholic Church. When defining 'traditional', I turn to the concept outlined by Detlef Pollack, who divides religiosity into traditional and non-traditional. He defines traditional belief as that which is realized within the church (on a Christian basis), with its visible

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1 Overall term for Slavic neo-paganism is *Rodnoverye*.

indicators being the declaration of faith in God, participation in services and church membership. While traditional religiosity takes place within the church, non-traditional – that is, non-church-based practice – has no fixed institutional platform (Pollack, 2003: 321–334). If we relate this theory to the Slovak religious milieu, it is necessary to some extent to categorize ‘non-traditional’ or alternative religiosity/spirituality and its elements (for example, to understand its expressions and practices). We can define these elements either as completely non-Christian, or at least not following the official doctrine of the church. These elements can either be imports (such as teachings of dharma and reincarnation, meditation, etc.), or they can also be elements of traditional lifestyles of living, non-mainstream cultural groups who, having moved from their traditional rural environment to the city, become part of the popular mainstream, or offer belief-oriented practices (divination from cards, making amulets, magical healing, etc.) to individual customers.

This last group of elements contains ideas that were present in Slovak territory but disappeared with the arrival of Christianity and are now reappearing; they can be encountered in the form of revivals of pre-Christian religions. The traditional assumption is that the increase in the presence of such ideas is a manifestation of detraditionalization, but it can also be a consequence of a pluralistic offer within the religious market or individualization. When it comes to alternative spirituality, or just spirituality, many automatically associate this phenomenon with the New Age movement. To a large extent, both phenomena overlap, but spirituality can also occur to a great extent within traditional, institutionalized religious systems (‘Christian spirituality’). Detlef Pollack divides alternative spirituality (English religiousness outside of the Church) into older and newer, while he considers astrology, belief in healers and reincarnation to be manifestations of an older alternative spirituality. Indicators of the new spirituality are characterized by a greater degree of individualism and one’s spiritual search. According to Pollack, this mainly includes belief in magic, occultism, spiritualism, New Ageism, cults, Zen, meditation and yoga (Pollack, 2003: 322).

As sociologist C. W. Roof points out, spirituality (and mysticism) is experience oriented and complemented by a certain distance from organized religion in both belief and practice. Unlike religion, spirituality is anti-institutional and anti-hierarchical; it tries to maintain a certain distance from the institutionalized form of religion (church or denomination). However, this does not necessarily mean that spirituality is in opposition to religion (Roof, Carroll, Roozen, *Eds.*, 1995: 252).

Sociologist G. Giordan points out, however, that the term spirituality is decreasingly used in organized theological discourse; rather, it is becoming a term that characterizes lay seekers of a spiritual life (2007: 162). Since the expansion of spirituality as both a concept and a phenomenon that is not closely or necessarily connected to organized religion, many sociologists have come to understand spirituality as something that is different from organized, institutionalized religion, or in other words, as an ‘alternative’ to religion. Roof argues that spirituality refers to a form of religiosity different from earlier forms, as expressed by groups such as the

baby boomers born in the 1950s and 1960s. This generation, he argues, has adapted religion in a different way than previous generations. This 'new spirituality' is based on an 'expressive individualism' that distances itself from established religion (Roof et al., 1995). Religion and spirituality thus become labels for what Campiche (2004: 276) calls the 'dualization of religion', a separation between institutionalized religion and an alternative, universal religion or spirituality. In Slovakia the results of surveys show similar results; however, the boundaries between religiosity and spirituality are vaguer. Surveys monitoring the consumption of alternative religious ideas show that alternatives can be (and are) consumed within the boundaries of church institutions. Analyzing data from the International Social Survey Programme<sup>2</sup> from 2008, it appears that people with higher religious sensitivity and a higher degree of religiosity are inclined to 'non-traditional' and non-conformist religious ideas, while people with a lower degree of religiosity are indifferent to similar currents of opinion.<sup>3</sup> It is, therefore, possible to state that in Slovakia in the period of late modernity there is a tendency towards the late modern 'untying' of religiosity from the church, increasing the individualization and privatization of religion (Zachar Podolinská, Tížik, Majo, 2020: 25). In the following text, I will try to prove that groups involved in Slavic Vedism fill this gap between religion and spirituality and, what is more, they have the potential to become what Knoblauch calls popular spirituality. The blurring between religion and non-religion is one of the main aspects of popular spirituality. Its basic aspect is the cultural ubiquity or wide distribution of phenomena related to spirituality. Folk religion was often limited by the social status of its bearers, but the spread of spirituality has also reached the higher social strata. Popular spirituality thus crosses or erases the boundaries between individual classes of society (Knoblauch, 2010: 11). Sociologist Z. Nešpor draws attention to a similar trend in our cultural environment, claiming that the trend of strong differences of opinion between church believers and alternative spiritualists has halted. The boundaries are blurred and unfixed – many traditional believers seek and practice alternatives, and spiritualists may approach 'traditional' church members in their opinion on spiritual question. Rather, religious indifference is more common, when an individual criticizes his camp (church or alternative), but to a certain extent or occasionally (weddings, consultations etc.) does not hesitate to use it (Nešpor, 2020: 106).

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2 Overview of the confessional nature of the population of the municipalities of Slovakia in the censuses 1968–2011 (Slovak archive of social data: [http://sasd.sav.sk/sk/data\\_katalog.php](http://sasd.sav.sk/sk/data_katalog.php); accessed September 15, 2021).

3 Detlef Pollack interpreted this phenomenon (the rise of alternative spirituality in Catholic countries) as a manifestation of the individualization of religion (Pollack, 2003).

## Research Methods

Participant observation was the dominant method of my research<sup>4</sup> in its general meaning – the direct participation of the anthropologist in the life of the researched community while ethnographic data is collected, through personal participation in naturally occurring cultural phenomena, social situations and processes (Soukup, 2014: 93). However, participatory observation alone would not be enough to understand the function of this community, so it was also combined with the method of autoethnography. As I am personally very close to the neo-pagan movements, I felt comfortable allowing myself to undergo a kind of ‘internal conversion’ and to take advantage of the opportunities offered by autoethnography as a researcher (Chang, 2008) by participating in groups as an active member. The autoethnographic method thus gave me a new perspective on the whole issue, including a certain opportunity to probe how Vedic Slavism operates on a personal level. The final method employed was online ethnography (Kozinets, 2010), in the form of studying how Vedic Slavism manifests in the online space; this was especially relevant given that it is still (to a large extent) an online community.

### Ethnography – Thick Description of Vedic Slavism in Slovakia

Based on the method formulated by Clifford Geertz in his study *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973), I will now present a thick description of individual groups that carry out activities in Slovakia.

#### *Anthropocentric Vedic Slavism*

This group is the product of direct (but modified) imports from the Russian Federation. The focus of this group is on the (white) man and his spiritual potential, on which he must work and can attain a spiritual level above the level of the gods. A sufficient number of such advanced individuals can accelerate the arrival of the golden age of Slavs. The racial narrative is very strongly present, but it is supported by the doctrine of spiritual development. The group distances itself from direct racism and violence but does not refuse to fight by spiritual–magical means (so-called curses – *preklínanie*). In this group, Pan-Slavic nationalism and Russophilia are strongly represented; in arguments and the general worldview, there is a strong inclination towards the so-called conspiracy theories. Organizationally, this group is

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4 This paper is based on my dissertation, ‘The Movement of Slavic Aryan Vedas as a Manifestation of New Types of Spirituality in Slovakia.’ I investigated this new religious movement through long-term research (2018–2021) and using several research methods. In addition to those mentioned here, I also used the research diary method (Ottenberg, 1993), interviews and the headnotes method (Seligman, 1951: 45). Theun Van Dijk’s critical discourse analysis (2010) was used as an analytical method.

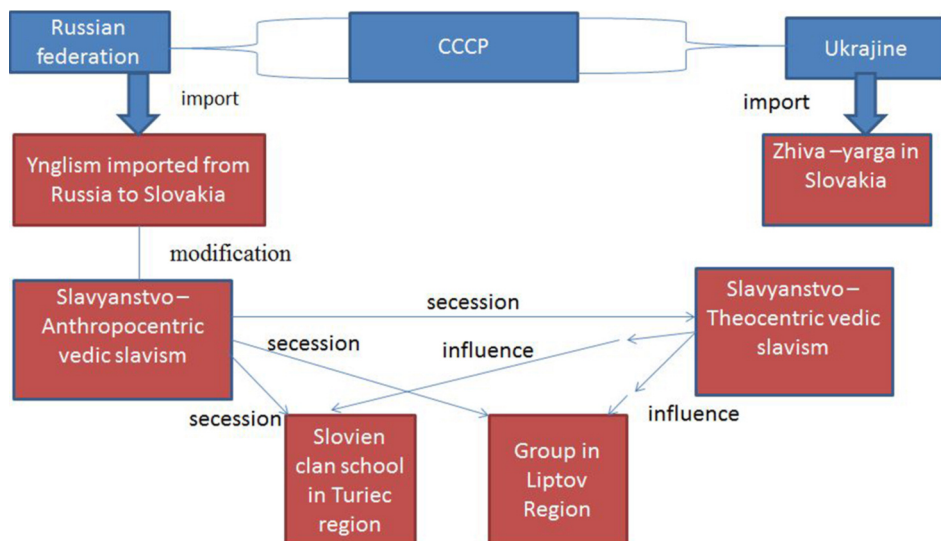


Fig. 1. Diagram of Vedic Slavism Groups (Author: T. Kubisa)

covered by the civic association Tartaria, whose main communication medium is the website <https://www.tartaria.sk/>. The main tool of spiritual work is meditation; sessions always follow the same structure, the only changes being the purpose and the ‘magic words’ used. At the beginning of the meditation, a *vedma* (witchseer) determines which magic words the participants will work with. The first meditation uses the affirmation ‘AS JESM’.<sup>5</sup> Participants are invited to write this word twice and then the formula:

*I know I renounce and free myself from all the negatives that are in me around me and also from all the causes of consequences and phantom creations called and also not called negatives. Here and now, always and everywhere, let it be. That’s the way it is, that is the way it will always be. This is my holy will. Let it be.* (Source: author’s field research)

Participants are independently asked to list all their personal fears (fear of death, failure, loss, etc.) as well as general fears (of authority, government, gods, fear for children, fear of diseases, etc.). The list continues by listing the wrongs the participants have ever committed and the sins the participants blame themselves for. Listing these sins and fears offers a kind of inner confession (psycho-hygiene) that is supposed to cleanse the participants. The meditation itself, which is conducted by the *vedma*, takes place in silence; no body position or breathing pattern is prescribed. The *vedma* sits in front of the participants at the table, eyes closed, during the meditation, in the course

5 In the meaning ‘I am As’, thus I am god; clearly a Scandinavian pagan influence.





Fig. 2. Congregational meditation of the anthropocentric group led by *vedma*. Bratislava, Slovakia, November 2019 (Photo: T. Kubisa)

which the participants purify themselves (from curses, from Muslim/ gypsy/ Catholic/ Jewish magic, etc.), and recites the magic words, ‘*Om-de-haar, Čistkár*’. However, these words are used only by the *vedma*: their meaning is not explained to the participants. The meditation lasts about 30 minutes, after which participants are asked to burn the paper they wrote on, as fire is seen as a cleansing force, and one which, at the same time, ‘starts the program’ (begins the process of overcoming those fears and sins). In this magical–meditative way, in addition to spiritual purification, participants can also attack enemies or purify and magically affect space. As mentioned above, although the meditation session’s structure remains the same, the stated purpose or magical words change. For example, a magical attack is formulated as follows: *Beregiňa jesem* [for women] *Svarga jesem* [for men],<sup>6</sup> *beregiňa jesem*, I know, I curse and destroy all my enemies, all those who curse and destroy me and everyone who is in my *obereg*<sup>7</sup> circle. For that is my higher will, of Mokosh,<sup>8</sup> for that is my higher will of the mother’

6 *Beregiňa* (*Beregiňa*) – a being worshiped especially among Eastern Slavs. It is not entirely clear whether it was a demonic water creature, similar to a fairy, or a divine being such as the goddess Mokoš (Profantová, Profant, 2007: 47). In the discourse of the anthropocentric group, the protective aspect of this being stands out, and the title *Beregiňa* is awarded to initiated women who are actively engaged in spiritual work. *Svarga* is understood in the same way as its academic meaning: it is the name of the sky, the heavens, or the other world (Miltner, 1997: 194).

7 In the discourse of the Slavic-Aryan Vedas, an *obereg* is an amulet and an *obereg* circle is a mental protective circle in which women imagine placing family members to protect them with their power. Creating an *obereg* circle is another important spiritual exercise for women in this group.

8 A goddess worshiped especially among Eastern Slavs, probably the personification of the mother



Fig. 3. Seminar of the anthropocentric group focused on learning the Slavic writing system. Košice, Slovakia, January 2020. (Photo: T. Kubisa)

(vedma Nadežda, 18 November 2019, Liptovský Mikuláš, transcript of the author's field research). Each participant lists separately what or who it is she wants to die under this curse. Jews, traitors and plunders of nature were among those mentioned in particular in the session I attended. Men can also curse, but they work with the magic word 'Svarga jesm'. As in previous cases, the curse is activated by burning the written list. The mediation can be (and should be) frequently repeated in private or at the next seminar (visiting seminars that the participant has already undergone is also encouraged because no two seminars are the same).<sup>9</sup>

The mystical and esoteric orientation of this group is dominant and, in fact, its activities in the so-called 'spiritual world' are a substitute for the actions that it purports to promote in the real world, even though it distances itself from physical violence. As an example, I can cite the following narrative that the group published on its website on the topic of magical attacks or curses, especially against other religious systems or their representatives. This text goes as far as interpreting the death of the diocesan Bishop of Spiš as demonstrating the effectiveness of a curse:

*While working in the Astral World on Mariánská Hora near Levoča and in front of the cathedral church in Spiš, we saw terrible scenes – the sacrifice of small, white children, infants. They were cut by the Bishop of Spiš. We started working intensively*

Earth and fertility (Profantová, Profant, 2007: 136). In discourse of this group she is perceived as a heavenly mother.

9 The economic aspect also plays role in this.



[cursing him] and he eventually died. We do not know everyone who attended these ceremonies (he barely did them for himself), but if you systematically curse – if the nation curses – all the participants in these ceremonies, will inevitably die as well. And maybe we will be surprised who.<sup>10,11</sup>

This group is a Slovak branch of a Russian organization named National General Slavic Centre of Bereginya (Всенародный Общеобразовательный Славянский Центр Берегиня; Vsenarodny Obscheobrazovatelnyi Slavyanskiy Centr Bereginya), directly linked to its leadership and using the same methodology.<sup>12</sup> In light of the above, we can conclude that the golden age of the Slavs is just a euphemism for the world that the leaders of this group would like – the unification of the Slavs under Russian domination, with Vedic Slavism as the dominant religion, and where other religions (but also nations and ethnicities) would have no or very little influence.

### *Theocentric Vedic Slavism*

Theocentric Vedic Slavism formed as the result of a split within the anthropocentric group in response to excessive radicalism. This group focuses more on the restoration of the 'original culture', including non-religious manifestations such as crafts, agrarian culture, worship of the gods via rituals, and so on. Of course, it also contains an esoteric dimension, and while it also proclaims that through spiritual development one reaches the level of the gods, cursing is rejected due to its karmic consequences. Conspiracy narratives and nationalism are present but in a more moderate form. This group is organizationally represented by the civic association Slavica and engages in the popularization and educational activities, such as publishing books by Slavic authors and organizing lectures and seminars on Slavism and the history of the Slavs. This group does not separate itself from others (such as contemporary pagan or New Age groups); on the contrary, it often establishes cooperation with other groups, even with those that do not recognize the Slavic-Aryan Vedas, or even Slavism itself, as the basis of their teachings. The basic driver of cooperation is an inclination towards a natural or alternative spirituality. The group shows a tendency to legitimize itself within mainstream society, for example, by campaigning for people to have the opportunity to declare themselves as a member of this religion in the census (2021), or by seeking to establish a natural farming community along the lines of the old Slavic 'clan communities'. In the theocentric group, the main form of worship is through ritual. Ceremonies usually take place in the forest. The ritual space is not permanent, but

10 Ladomír, *Úvahy*, <https://www.tartaria.sk/uvahy/> (accessed October 27, 2022).

11 The reference probably refers to the death of Bishop Štefan Sečka (1953–2020); Šimoňáková Mária: 'The diocesan bishop of Spiš, Štefan Sečka, died', <https://spis.korzar.sme.sk/c/22520446/zomrel-spissky-diecezny-biskup-stefan-secka.html> (accessed February 18, 2022).

12 Надежда Петровна Токарева, Ведущая семинаров по славянским чисткам (Nadezhda Petrovna Tokareva, Vedushchaya seminarov po slavyanskych chistkam) <https://mpmv.ru/nadezhda-petrovna-tokareva/> (accessed March 1, 2022).

rather is always prepared ad hoc at the chosen place. The individual elements vary according to the festival being celebrated, but the central element is always the sacrificial fire (also called ‘living fire’). The living fire is always lit using a flint and birch bark; no petrochemicals or matches are ever used to light it. This is a key condition for it to be called ‘alive’ (*živý*). Once ignited, the fire is consecrated by a simple chant/formula, or *pravslávenie*: ‘From the living fire to the living fire!’ An essential element of the ceremony (but also of the whole feast and ritual) is the altar or sacrificial stone on which the sacrifices are placed. Herbs, grains, cakes or other dishes can serve as sacrifices to ancestors and gods, but never alcohol or meat dishes: a bloody sacrifice is excluded. Theocentric Slavism does not include the presence of wooden idols (*kummirs*) of gods as a condition of the ritual place. During ceremonies, a flag is stuck in the ground next to the altar. Made of fabric, it might bear a symbol such as the star of Perun; the national flag of the Slovak Republic is also used. Round dances (*chorovody*)<sup>13</sup> are then danced around the flag and anthem or national folk songs are sung. The offerings are subsequently ‘sanctified’ by all participants laying hands on them (collective sanctification). Individual sanctification is also possible, by placing the offering next to the heart. The acolyte then throws the offerings into the fire, inviting participants to silently, in their hearts, ask their ancestors and gods for what they need or want to come true. The ritual continues with participants jumping over the fire nine times (the sacred number of Vedic Slavism), as a symbol of purification of the body and spirit. Before each jump, the participant must praise one of the gods, crying, for example, ‘Sláva Mokoši’ (Glory to Mokosh). Other participants reply, ‘Večná sláva’ (Eternal Glory). In the ritual I observed, after each jump the participant walked a few steps barefoot to a small pond (artificially excavated) and wet his feet. An acolyte explained to me (before the ceremony) that this is how participants make contact with the four elements: connect to air by breathing and singing; connecting to fire by jumping over it; connecting to the earth by walking barefoot; and connecting to water by soaking the feet (field research by the author, Nitra, 7 July 2020). These activities are inspired by sacred texts – use of the Slavic Vedas is obvious, but the actual construction of ceremonies and the sequence of individual elements is very loose and depends on the number of participants, location, weather, and other factors. Firewalking can also be added as a means of spiritual purification, but in practice this ceremony was abandoned due to the risk of starting wildfires, especially in the summer months. As a result, I did not have a chance to observe firewalking in the course of my field research. In 2019, the construction of a so-called Slavic court (*slovanský dvor*) began; today it consists of a farm family house and courtyard; Svantovít’s garden and gazebo with a replica of the Zbruč idol;<sup>14</sup> a structure, Pribinova Dvorana, as an

13 *Chorovody* – a group of collective, form-diverse dances, synthesizing singing, simple dance movement and often games, often associated with calendar customs (e.g., solstice celebration) (Botík, Slavkovský, Eds., 1995: 198).

14 *Svantovít* – a four-headed god worshiped on Rügen island, associated with agriculture, prosperity and military functions (Profantová, Profant, 2007: 210–211). An idol discovered in the Zbruč river



*Fig. 4. Individual jump over the bonfire on solstice (Kupala) celebration. Nitra, Slovakia, July 2020 (Photo: T. Kubisa)*

accessory of the farmhouse; and Perún's garden, a park and a monument dedicated to the memory of the genocide of the Slavs. Plans for the future include a Slavic gate, a wooden house, Slavic idols, a marketplace, and an orchard. It also houses a library and is used for educational and cultural events (a community centre).<sup>15</sup>

In light of the above-mentioned details, it can be concluded that theocentric Vedic Slavism hopes to offer a positive example of how 'Russian-type paganism' can exist mainstream Slovak society and offer competition to other neo-pagan Slavic groups.

### *Zhiva-Yarga*

This group represents a separate section of Vedic Slavism: although inspired by it, in Slovakia it never formed part of the original teachings. The group's founder and representative is the Ukrainian healer Vladimir Kurovski. This group organizes seminars focused on the use of the energy of the goddess *Živa*<sup>16</sup> for spiritual and

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(Ukraine) in 1848 is considered by some to be the god Svantovít, due to its four heads and the cornucopia located on one side of the relief. Although various researchers interpret the scenes on the relief differently, it probably depicts a complex of several representations (ibid.: 243–244)[15]

15 <https://www.slavica.sk/slovansky-dvor-slavica/>

16 A goddess worshiped by the Western Slavs, but of unclear functions. A connection with the cult of fertility is possible (Profantová, Profant, 2007: 249).



Fig. 5. Community centre (*Slovanský Dvor*) of the theocentric group. *Alekšince, Slovakia, 2022* (Source: <https://www.slavica.sk/slovansky-dvor-slavica/>)

healing purposes. However, these meetings are much more sporadic compared to the other groups (one or two every two years) because Kurovski works mainly in Ukraine, travelling to other countries periodically on a 'seminar tour'. His teachings are also found in books, which provide some practical instructions for the use of healing energy; however, the self-taught can only reach a certain limit from these books alone. Those who wish to become a full-fledged healer must receive initiation from the founder. The economic dimension of this group is very significant; at the same time, it is a very tolerant group and is open to devotees of other religions and members of other nations. Kurovski emphasizes that *Živa* is merely a Slavic name for universal energy, which can be used by everyone and named according to their tradition (Holy Spirit, prana, etc.). It shows the most significant parallel with the Reiki healing movement. Anthropocentric Slavism is strongly antagonistic towards this group, calling it misguided and often (verbally) attacking its founder. Theocentric Slavism sometimes cooperates with this movement. It is still in the process of forming its community; the group established a website<sup>17</sup> only in 2019, and its non-existent (or extremely private) membership makes it a group difficult to study by classic ethnographic methods.

<sup>17</sup> <https://akademiarodosvet.webnode.sk/>

## Vedic Slavism – Alternative Between Spirituality and Religiosity

To better analyze the phenomenon of Vedic Slavism, I divided this religious/spiritual movement into so-called dimensions according to the parsimonious model (Pollack, 2003: 180), placing particular emphasis on the dimensions of membership and practice. These two dimensions are crucial to determining whether we are talking about religiosity – that is, an institutionalized form of experiencing a religious reality – or spirituality, an individual and free form.

### *Membership – Anthropocentric Group*

The membership dimension in this group is loosely organized, in that members do not need to sign up or formally belong. On the other hand, membership criteria are tightly defined according to ethno-identification: members must be white (of the Caucasian race), preferably Slavic, and agree with the group's ideas. Vedma Nadežda started an introductory seminar in 2019 with the greeting: 'It is good to look at this audience because all the faces here are Russian' (vedma Nadežda, introductory seminar, Liptovský Mikuláš, 18 November 2019, transcription from the author's research diary). At a different large seminar, an ethnically-based distinction was made: 'if the Chinese were sitting here, I wouldn't do this seminar, because they have a different energy structure' (vedma Nadežda, 25 November 2019, Bratislava, transcription of a recording from the author's field research). Ladomír (the Slovak leader of the anthropocentric group writer and a translator), on the other hand, in a seminar on the Old Slavonic alphabet, assumes all members will be readers of his website ([www.tartaria.sk](http://www.tartaria.sk)): 'you all know what this is about, hey? Are you all readers of my website?' (Ladomír, 27 January 2020, Košice, seminary – seminar on Old Slavonic alphabet, transcription of the recording from the author's field research).

The group does not manifest itself significantly in the field of external signs, either through clothing or some special symbol of identification. However, although there is no uniform per se, both the Slavic-Aryan Vedas (published as books) and the group's website ([tartaria.sk](http://tartaria.sk)) make recommendations regarding clothing, for example, that it should be made of natural materials, white in colour, and that women should not wear trousers. Some of the participants in the seminars and rituals I attended wore 'Slavic clothing', mainly in the form of shirts. It is necessary to mention that many of the men were armed with knives, although physical violence is rejected. Participants are encouraged to undertake numerous seminars, and to repeat the same seminars several times. In my opinion, this offers a substitute for social supervision, as the social ties are still relatively loose within the group.



## *Membership – Theocentric Group*

Similarly to an anthropocentric group, there is no form of exclusive membership<sup>18</sup> (sometimes called ‘membership from above’). There are ‘inner circles’ of leadership and organizers, but they have more the character of interest groups or friendly gatherings: they are not organized in a hierarchical way like churches or lodges. Rather, a practical system prevails: each member has an assigned function which they perform during larger events or public meetings. In terms of ‘membership from below’ – that is, the subjective feeling of belonging and self-identification – this is also not regulated: anyone can feel like a member of a group as long as they share the group’s ideas and hold compatible opinions. As such, individual sympathizers of this direction may be inclined to become members of other groups at different stages of their spiritual life, and as their preferences change under the influence of new knowledge or a particular event.

The groups themselves, which have already been profiled, remain highly ‘fluid’ and tend to generate new subgroups or change who they prefer to cooperate with. Sympathizers tend to be more inclined towards ideologies or ideas than to any specific ‘physical’ group. Similarly, there is no regulation regarding visual or other identification, such as clothing. In the case of ceremonies in that take place in natural settings, it is generally taken into account that clothing should correspond to the weather conditions. If someone dresses in a Slavic shirt or other ‘traditional’ clothing, it would be an individual expression.

## *Membership – Zhiva-Yarga*

Membership of this group is extremely open,<sup>19</sup> to the point where it could be said that it does not exist. Zhiva-Yarga is present in Slovakia mainly through the sharing of this movement’s ideas and self-study of V. Kurovski’s writings. Seminars are the main format for gatherings, but as soon as the Kurovski’s visit is over, social ties disappear; there is no social supervision to control or direct whether the graduates use or expand their knowledge following a formal initiation, or, indeed, whether they do not distort the teachings, or abuse their learning financially.

## *The Dimension of Practice – Anthropocentric Group*

The anthropocentric group prescribes meditation as the main form of spiritual practice. Meditation can be done in a group or individually (both forms are recommended). This practice distinguishes this group from neo-pagan (*Rodnoverye*)

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18 The supporters gravitate more to an idea, than to an actual organization or group. Everyone who meets the racial criteria and supports the ideology of Slavism is welcome; there is no initiation and no other formal criteria.

19 I can not confirm this, but due to its high level of tolerance narrative and strong financial orientation, I believe that this group would abandon even the racial criteria for attending their seminars.

groups where the main practice is a ceremony or ritual. There are several non-traditional elements in these meditation forms, which I have already mentioned in part: while they mainly adopt narratives of dharma religions (mantra, karma, etc.), they also incorporate other elements that might be called oriental, such as ancient Egyptian (references to the god Horus), Hebrew (the Kabbalah) and others. The basic manifestation of this group in this dimension is through the seminars it organizes, which have the character of self-help (human development or grow-your-potential) seminars, which is unique within the neo-pagan scene. Participants receive spiritual knowledge or guidance and training in the methodology, but everyone has to work with these tools themselves if they want to reach the level of the 'golden age'. These seminars are divided into two types: 'beginner' and 'advanced'.<sup>20</sup> Each seminar has two parts, theoretical and practical, which alternate frequently.

### *The Dimension of Practice – Theocentric Group*

In the theocentric group, there are two forms of practice – ceremony and meditation. The ceremony, a collective activity, is the dominant element, while meditation is more individual and more supportive in character. The various ceremonies follow a nearly identical structure (as described in the previous section). The ritual reflects the ethnoreligious nature of this group, that is, that ethnicity and religion are inseparable, the gods are understood as ancestors, the state symbol is sacral, and hymnic songs (*Nad Tatrou sa blýska, Na Kráľovej Holi*, etc.) are considered religious. According to followers, the purpose of dances and songs is to 'tune in to the right (mental) frequency' (author's field research, Nitra, 7 July 2020). Spiritual exercises in this group are aimed at developing human potential. These include activities such as meditation where the participants work with the elements, for example, 'meditation, focused on fire', which serves as protection against the cold. Seminars organized by this group serve primarily to educate; they can also have spiritual content (such as meditation), but in general, status of the esoteric teaching and meditation is less important than in the anthropocentric group.

### *The Dimension of Practice – Zhiva-Yarga*

As mentioned, this group's practice is difficult to examine because it has a purely private and individual character. The Zhiva-Yarga group prescribes spiritual physical exercises, aimed mainly at channelling Zhiva universal (energy). There is also some form of offering (for example, burning a bundle of herbs), but this serves more as incense in a private ritual than as an actual offering. The central element of this group is what they call Slavic healing, or '*celiteľstvo*'. This is mainly focused on spiritual (magical) healing, although there are also quasi-religious/modern alternative

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<sup>20</sup> Literally called big or large.

elements, especially yoga, called ‘*yarga*’, in the group’s discourse. This group, like the anthropocentric group, has a strong commercial orientation, focusing especially on selling books and organizing seminars. However, the seminars do not have the character of congregational services, as in anthropocentric Slavism, but are exclusively informative and educational. Their task is to pass on the knowledge and methodology of healing, which each graduate can then practice in private self-healing. Another activity members are encouraged to do is to exercise the body, or rather the physical–spiritual system, through *yarga* (Slavic yoga), as ‘an ancient system of self-improvement’. Again, this is a franchised system of the more commonly known oriental concept of yoga. Yoga positions (*asanas*) are adapted to the Slavic context; for example, the position generally known as the bow is called ‘Stribog’s bow’; the position known as ‘warrior’, is called ‘Jarilo’ position,<sup>21</sup> and so on (Kurovski, 2016).

## Conclusions

Before I present the conclusions of this study, a brief recapitulation: the anthropocentric group exhibits the characteristics of a radical esoteric group that, through its spiritual exercises and methods, seeks to influence the majority and the world. The goal of spiritual endeavour is to rise above the level of the gods through meditation.

The theocentric group has the same goal, but its rhetoric is more conciliatory, trying to influence the outside world through cultural education and cultural events. It has many similarities with the reconstructionist groups of neo-paganism but does not abandon the ideological basis of the books: the Slavic-Aryan Vedas.

The Zhiva-Yarga group does not have such a goal, it only conveys esoteric healing knowledge. It is also important that, outside of Vedic Slavism, these groups are considered a single or unified group.

If we subject these groups to analysis according to Pollack, who divides spirituality into older and newer forms, all groups show elements of both. From the older category, the clear example is belief in reincarnation, which is shared by all factions. Astrology (modified as Vedic astrology) is mainly present in the teachings of anthropocentrics but is not widely popular due to its complexity. Belief in spiritual healing is also present in all groups and is the basis of the Zhiva-Yarga faction. From the category of newer forms, there are elements of Buddhism (meditation) and magic, especially among anthropocentric and the Zhiva-Yarga group, where *yarga* is also a very prominent element. The religiosity of these groups is most easily demonstrated by the fact that they have a clearly defined idea of the supernatural, but also fulfil a practical function for their sympathizers, giving them advice on how to cope with problems, death, suffering, and so on.

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21 *Stribog* – a god worshiped by the eastern Slavs as a personification of the wind (Profantová, Profant, 2007: 209–210). *Jarilo/ Jarovit* – a local Pomeranian deity worshiped as the god of spring vegetation; however, he also has warlike aspects, such as a golden shield (ibid.: 89–90).

As can be seen from the ethnography of these groups and the analysis through the parsimonious model, all groups fall into the zone between institutionalized religiosity and individualized spirituality. Such a conclusion is possible from several key points:

- all groups, have a loosely defined membership,
- the individual decides for himself in what intensity and in what activities he will participate in the events in the group,
- all groups offer both individual teachings and practice and collective activities (which can be practised either way),
- all groups have established some sort of institution (or are associated with some external institution), but do not force it upon their followers.

The boundaries between religion and spirituality are blurred in this religious/spiritual movement. Furthermore, due to loose membership, there are no solid boundaries between individual groups. The individual follower of these beliefs can practice meditation according to the anthropocentric method, then participate in a ceremony or gathering of the theocentric group, and spiritually heal themselves following the teachings of the Zhiva-Yarga group – and, indeed, many do so.

The question of origin in Slovakia is still open. It seems that this really comes down to spiritual drivers (i.e., the satisfaction of a person's spiritual needs), but there are also opinions that Vedic Slavism, in its entirety, is a project of the Russian secret service (FSB) as an element of hybrid warfare. This argument cannot be completely ignored, especially in connection with the Russian invasion of Ukraine (2022), because the Vedic Slavism platform can provide suitable conditions for the recruitment of 'agents', influencers of public opinion, and so-called 'trolls'. Also, relations between groups of Vedic Slavism and other religious groups (including alternative ones) and neo-pagans are problematic, even negative. Groups vary in attitude, from rejection of others (anthropocentrics), to a degree of tolerance and cooperation with other neopagan or alternative groups (theocentrics), to being completely tolerant and inclusive (as with the Zhiva-Yarga branch).

It remains to be seen how long these groups will exist in their current form, and whether they will eventually lean towards harder institutionalization as part of the next step towards acceptance by the majority, or whether they will merge with other alternative spiritual schools and become merely a fringe spiritual school within the New Age movement.

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