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Journal of Ethnology and Folkloristics 15 (2): 25–42
DOI: 10.2478/jef-2021-0015

TRADITIONS AND THE IMAGINED PAST IN RUSSIAN ANASTASIAN INTENTIONAL COMMUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

This article* deals with the concept of tradition and the interpretation of the Vedic past in Russian intentional communities. The movement is based on the book series *The Ringing Cedars of Russia* (*Zvenyashchiye kedry Rossii*) by Vladimir Megre published in the 1990s. The main heroine of these books is Anastasia, who shares with the author her knowledge of the ancient ancestors. Some readers take her advice and build a new kind of intentional community – 'kin domain' settlements (*rodovyye pomestiya*). The Anastasians tend to restore lost traditions, which are usually associated with Russia's pre-Christian past. Traditional culture is understood as a conservative and utopian lifestyle that existed in the Vedic Age during the time of the Vedrus people. The commodification of local culture and tradition is one of the resources that ecovillagers try to use. The 'traditional' and 'organic' labels increase the price of many of their goods and services. One of the most popular products made by intentional communities is Ivan-chay ('Ivan tea'), declared an indigenous and authentic beverage of the Russian people.

KEYWORDS: New Age • Anastasia movement • ecovillage • intentional community • traditions

INTRODUCTION

New religious movements emerged in the second half of the 20th century often refer to the theology and practices of well-known and acknowledged world religions, as well as to recent inventions rooted in the imaginary past. Some new religions, especially neopaganism, esoteric and New Age Spirituality movements, claim to be successors to traditions that were either deliberately distorted or lost over time for some reason

* The work was supported by the Russian Foundation for Basic Research, project No. 18-509-12017 (New Religious Culture in Late Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia: Ideology, Social Networks, Discourses).

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ISSN 1736-6518 (print), ISSN 2228-0987 (online)

(Hanegraaff 1996: 302–330; Lewis 2012). In Russia, the origin of tradition can be found in the ancient Slavic/Vedic past or in lost civilisations such as Arkaim or Hyperborea (Shnirelman 2011; Tyukhtyayev 2018).

For many religious groups in Russia, the references to 'folk', 'traditional' and 'heritage' play an important role in their popular theology. Usually, these markers allow them to emphasise the contrast between their own cultural and historical richness to the modern Western lifestyle and its 'wrong' values (Shtyrkov 2015; Aitamurto 2016). This article deals with the concept of traditions and interpretation of the Golden Age understood as the Vedic past among the creators of such intentional communities as ecovillages or kin domain settlements (*poseleniya rodovykh pomestiy*). The majority of these communities define the origin of these projects as being in the long past and speak not about construction but about the revival of back-to-nature lifestyles. I would like to examine how alternative history and the concept of tradition are implemented in Russian Anastasian ecovillages. Why does a very modern and seemingly pragmatic project need to reference the glourious past and use forms of nostalgia? Researchers consider these ecovillages as "self-isolated communities" (Pozanenko 2016) or "communal utopia" (Pranskevičiūtė 2015), which reflects well the worldview of the initiators. Rasa Pranskevičiūtė-Amoson remarks that representing "the (trans)local prehistoric and local national pasts", the Anastasians construct "imagined indigenousness" (2018: 292), where 'indigenous' points "to the origins in particular places at some point in time" (Harvey 2020: 5).

THE ANASTASIA MOVEMENT

The ideological basis of the majority of Russian ecovillages is the *The Ringing Cedars of Russia* (*Zvenyashchiye kedry Rossii*)[1] book series by Vladimir Megre, first published in 1996. The author describes the romantic story of his acquaintance and communication with mysterious hermit Anastasia during his business trip to the Siberian taiga. The main character of these books lives in a dugout in the Siberian forest and has supernatural powers and abilities such as telepathy, teleportation, telekinesis, communication with animals and plants. She also receives lost information about the ancient ancestors the Vedruss people directly from God. Anastasia shares her knowledge with Megre and asks him to write a book that should change a world.[2]

The numerous readers of these books, who wish to build their lives around Anastasia's ideas, are usually called Anastasians (*anastasiytsy*). Her character has inspired some of them to change their lifestyles and belief systems by following her instructions in daily life. Others sympathised with the ideas or saw the story as a pleasant fairy tale. It is hardly possible to count the number of readers because of the lack of membership and institutional affiliations, and the varying involvement in the realisation of the ideas described in the books. The *Ringing Cedars* series is on the shelves of most bookshops in the country. According to the author's websites, the total circulation of books has reached more than 20 million in Russia. The books have been translated into 24 languages including English, German, Croatian and Japanese.[3]

The Anastasians do not compose a specific group and its members share a range of interests and goals using experience reading and interpreting popular esoteric and

New Age literature. Their views rest on adapting and altering the teachings of Megre's books on an individual basis. Frequently the readers of *Ringing Cedars* have previous esoteric and/or religious experiences, which can sometimes overlap with Anastasian identity. Today there are different interpretations of the written texts with followers changing and supplementing some ideas while ignoring others. As with any New Age movement, the Ringing Cedars movement as such is relative: it does not have a hierarchical control system, recognised leaders, compulsory membership, or fees. So far, it lacks any religious institutionalised forms of interaction. Like many other New Agers all over the world, they "move through fluid networks rather than settled collectivities" (Possamai 2007: 151).

The Anastasians' philosophy is very close to global contemporary spiritual ideas (Hanegraaff 1996: 365–366) since it is grounded in the post-Soviet milieu. It emphasises such concepts as a healthy lifestyle, the holistic relationship between word and deed, healing practices, and self-help therapy. The Anastasians have been seeking a sustainable future, which they imagine as an anti-technocratic, spiritual, and conscious way of life that is close to nature and the Earth. One of the Anastasians' main aims is to raise 'awareness' (*osoznannost'*) of ethical issues, asceticism, empathy and development of supernatural abilities (such as lucid dreams, teleportation, telepathy, etc.).

At the same time, the contemporary post-Soviet New Age in general is often oriented toward "conservative nationalism, imperial resentment, and conspiracy" (Menzel and Panchenko 2021: 140). Ideas of gender inequality and the subordinate role of women are interpreted as 'traditional values' and are highly regarded in the milieu. This trend is more likely to reflect the attitudes of the broader society than to be a unique feature of the New Age. (Ibid.) In addition to this Russian New Age Spirituality frequently includes interest in folk traditions and customs, alternative history and language.

My fieldwork on the Anastasian intentional communities took place mainly in the northwestern and central parts of Russia during between 2009 and 2021. I visited ecovillages in the Belgorod (1), Kaluga (1), Leningrad (3), Moscow (1), Pskov (2), and Vladimir (1) regions; the Republic of Karelia (1) and Krasnodar Krai (1). I went to some of these locations several times, usually on short trips of a few days to festivals, holidays, guest days. Once I was invited to a wedding ceremony in the kin's domain, another time I visited a friend who was staying in the ecovillage, and on one of the trips I joined other Anastasians who went to get acquainted with the life of a kin domain settlement. The main method of my work was participant observation of the particular activities and of daily life in the ecovillages. I also interviewed 20 people and conducted many informal conversations with residents and guests of ecovillages and continued to communicate with some of them after returninig home. In addition, I use Internet sources such as the websites of Vladimir Megre,[4] the Ringing Cedars of Russia Fund[5] and Anastasian settlements;[6] and social networking services (Youtube and Vkontakte), which are the most popular among residents of the kin domains for presenting achievements, finding like-minded people, and advertising the goods and lifestyles of ecovillagers.

Although the Anastasian communities are usually unstable, 'dislocated', and often virtual, the readers are unified by a common book series and their dream of building kin domains, a new kind of intentional community. The central idea of this movement is to construct a new ideal world in which all people live in harmony with nature, escape urban misery and find God's presence, find a good ecological environment, have a family and reconstruct true values. This kind of alternative living is based on passing down this piece of land to their descendants (Megre 2006 [1999]).

Rebecca Gould, who investigated spiritual seeking with connection to family homesteading, concluded that nature-oriented spiritual practices of modern America were not the only forms of rebellion against the culture of consumption. The homesteaders express one version of an increasingly common aspect of modern American religious life: the tendency to gain religious (or spiritual) life outside of institutional structures. For the dwellers of family homesteads (as well as for Anastasians), "nature had come to serve as the 'ultimate reference point' or 'ultimate concern' by which good and evil, right and wrong, sacred and profane could be discerned" (Gould 2005: 4). All conceptions of 'good' and 'bad' are individualised, and everyone can choose their way of reaching them without a unified system of control. While researching these religious phenomena, problems of boundary demarcation are always encountered. The challenge lies in the controversies between individual self-spirituality and the need for communication with like-minded people.

Each kin domain should be not less than one hectare of land and should be owned by a family and handed down from generation to generation. This 'Space of Love' has a connection with the Universe, which bestows spiritual strengths and powers. The kin domains project is declared the most successful path to prosperity in Russia and the whole world. It is a fully urban project because most of the participants do not have any experience with life in villages. Most of the Anastasian settlements are located in the central part of Russia (Kaluga, Tula, Vladimir, Yaroslavl regions), in the Urals and in the south of the country in Krasnodar Krai. Kin domain settlement residents maintain close ties with the city: they continue to work there, preserve housing and city benefits, organise distance learning for children in city schools. The ecovillages vary in size from a few families to hundred of kin domains. Many of them are accessibile from large cities although the roads inside the settlement are usually bad. The website devoted to Russian ecovillages provides the following statistics: there are more than 400 projects, with 500 Anastasian ecovillages and 6,000 inhabitants in Russia.[7] The ecovillagers speak about unanimity when all details of co-existence meet in negotiations, although they do not have a communal life insisting on a harmonious family project.

Since 1996, there has been a Global Ecovillage Network, which unites different ecological and spiritual communities from all over the world.[8] Western intentional communities are more often communes, whereas Russian ecovillages are almost always independent, separate households, where people live separately from one another (Mirzagitova et al. 2021: 12). Russian intentional communities also put more stress on family project and kinship territory, than on ecological questions. Focus on anti-urban and 'back-to-nature' lifestyle in kin domains includes a deep interest in Slavic heritage

and traditions. *The Russian Ecovillages and Initiatives Union* (GEN division) includes only 20 ecovillages and some related projects.[9] This low involvement of Russian eco-settlers in the union is due to linguistic limitations and ideological difference. In particular, one of the controversial issues for Russian Anastasians is the acceptance of homosexuality in many European intentional communities.[10]

ALTERNATIVE HISTORY

Vladimir Megre's book series, among other ideas, offers a version of a 'lost' or 'heroic' history, as Veronica Davidov (2015: 5) calls it, using Marshall Sahlins' concept. Megre continues the tradition of his predecessors who solved the 'mysteries of history', and, in general, does not offer radically new ideas. He demonstrates a rejection of the modern way of life and proclaims the need to overcome 'dark forces' and return to pristine knowledge. Among today's disasters are inverted family values, loneliness, bad ecology and problems with health. New Agers offer a simple solution to all these miseries with the construction of kin domains; they see this process as the restoration of ancient tradition.

Researcher of esotericism Wouter Hanegraaff notes that New Agers usually divide history into three phases: the ancient period of prosperity of spiritual wisdom, a period of decline (sometimes called the age of Pisces) and the expected revival (the age of Aquarius). He sees the source of such chronology in theosophical tradition reinterpreted by modern esotericism (Hanegraaff 1996: 302). Similar periodisation with some additional details also exists among Anastasians. In such a picture everything beautiful, wise, and worthy is hidden in the past, and mankind moves in a regressive direction. Only a radical break of the vector of this movement, reevaluation can turn the course in the opposite direction. This ancient world is an example of a universal Golden Age, which is now preserved only in separate, hidden places. One of them is the place where Anastasia lives.

Vladimir Megre suggests an elaborate, though not always consistent, alternative historical narrative where chronology is developed cyclically from an era of happiness and prosperity through degradation to the forthcoming revival of the Golden Age. The original and prosperous period of humankind (as it is called in the Vedic books) lasted 990,000 years, during which people and nature were in full harmony with each other. After the Vedic period the 9,000-year Age of Image followed. We live in the third epoch, the Occult Age. It will last only a thousand years and began "with intensive degradation of human consciousness" (Megre 2007a [2002]: 102–103).

According to Megre's *The Book of Kin* the Vedruss people lived 5,000 years ago in the territory "from the Mediterranean and Black Sea to the farthest northern latitudes" in the Vedic Age (Megre 2007a [2002]: 94). Some 'mistake', which occurred in the Image Age, led to the Vedruss felling asleep. "And this happy civilization is dormant right to this day, and will continue to sleep until those who are awake search out the mistake in the image creation" (Megre 2007a [2002]: 96). In the future awakening of the "dormant Vedic civilization" Megre speaks about Russia and at the same time notes the unity of the Vedruss people.[11]

Such ambivalence of the national and global characterises all of Megre's books. Different groups of readers can find in them both views about the special path and destiny of Russia, and ideas of unity and brotherhood of all mankind. This is probably why the books spread to the West as well. Pranskevičiūtė-Amoson (2018) states that the 'back to nature' narrative both has the universalistic and traditionalistic modes. In particular, Anastasians believe that one day all humanity will return to nature and will create kin domains. On the other hand, they imply "reviving the imaginative archaic pasts, ancestral lifestyles, re-assembled traditions and 'indigenous' existences" (Pranskevičiūtė-Amoson 2018: 287). Graham Harvey (2020: 2) argues that the indigenising tendency and the tendency to stress universal relevance or global engagement (extending) exist "on a continuum and are more likely to be matters of emphasis rather than opposites".

The historical and cultural richness of the ancient Vedruss civilisation attracts many Russian Anastasians who wish to wake up and return to the Vedic Age. The idea of Vedic is rather widespread in Russian New Age and pagan discourse. In particular, the word 'Vedism' was used in *The Book of Veles*, a famous fake manuscript that was declared to be written in around the 9th century, rediscovered and republished by Yuriy Mirolyubov and S. Lesnoy in the 1960s (see Lesnoy 1966). In Russia the title of this book was *Russian Vedas – The Book of Veles.* It inspired many Russian pagans to define their identity (Aitamurto 2016: 25). One of Mirolyubov's ideas about the religion of ancient Slavs was that it was a "Vedism spoiled by time, circumstances, events and relocation" (Mirolyubov 1981: 92–93, op. cit. Tvorogov 1988: 93). The ancient Slavs were identified with ancient Indians, and origins were found in a very distant past (Tvorogov 1988: 93–94).

Apart from chronological narratives about the Vedic Age, the Anastasians use Vedruss themes relating to contemporary situations. The Vedruss concept denotes some activities or things attributed to the significant past. They mention this terminology most frequently while speaking about Vedic family; Vedruss gender roles and Vedic duties of females and males. This means foremost patriarchal values, the male function of making a living, and the female focus on children and family (Sadovina 2021). There are many teachers, special on-line courses, dating websites and books devoted to finding a happy Vedic life. Some Russian Anastasian ecovillages are named things like Vedrussiya, Russko-Vedovo, and Vedrussov Grad. The Anastasians also need these words to mark meaningful events in their lives. The proper rites should resemble the Vedruss rituals. Megre's books also give some templates for birth, wedding and burial ceremonies.

These appeals to the imagined past among the Anastasians show how national ideas[12] seem to be important and combine with worship of nature and the earth. References to Vedas and Vedic civilisation are found quite often in modern Russia. As usual, they interpret the root 'ved' as full of knowledge, wisdom, and freedom to choose. This refers to the glorious past and to the imagined achievements of that time. People can apply different meanings to these words. Irina Sadovina shows the variety of uses of Vedic Wisdom in contemporary Russia; it can be associated with Indian Vedas, Russia's pre-Christian past, and with "a source of spiritual potential and knowledge that is not clearly defined" (Sadovina 2020: 65). The Anastasians only specify it with Vedruss connotation using some mythology about the "dormant nation".

The source of knowledge about the hidden history for the author of *Ringing Cedars* and his readers is Anastasia: her parables, set out in 'white verse', tell about the life of

the Vedic Rus'. In addition, the culture of ancestors was preserved in the hearts and souls of people (Megre 2007b [2002]: 177). In general, they expect that all people, not just the 'academic elite', should acknowledge the reconstruction of this hidden period of history.

Michael Herzfeld (2016: 139) marks the importance of a "static image of an unspoiled and irrecoverable past" for everyday interpretation of actual events and actions. He defines it as "structural nostalgia", meaning "this collective representation of an Edenic order – a time before time – in which the balanced perfection of social relations has not yet suffered the decay that affects everything human" (ibid.). The imagined past becomes a point of reference that is compared to the imperfect realities of today, and this historical interpretation legitimises some discoursive products that are relevant for our time.

TRADITION(S)

A heterogeneous milieu of spiritual seekers who build their lives along with the contents of Megre's *Ringing Cedars*, stress folk traditions. The Anastasians tend to restore lost traditions (first of all customs and holidays), which they call Vedic but which are usually associated with the pre-Christian past of Russia. In so doing, they overlay their history onto the global context and speak of the Slavic customs as formerly relating to all people.

For every reader, the category of tradition is positive in advance. The same is true for traditional religions.

> 'Traditionalism' is a quality directly related to the characteristics implicitly ascribed to 'real' religion: invariability, orderliness, the ability to provide a model of stability to a changing society, which is subject to rapid, painful transformations, and is thus in need of ideal paradigms of guaranteed stability and historical rootedness. (Shtyrkov 2015: 76)

For Anastasians, 'traditional culture' is the original, harmonious time of the Vedic period when everyone was close to the land and nature. This is how it is interpreted in a popular social networking group among Anastasians:

> Traditional culture is the culture of the earth. Going back to it, we get closer to nature, begin to live its biorhythms, the rhythms of the universe, if you like. The modern humans are disconnected from their past, the old understanding of the world is lost, the way of life, which our ancestors lived for many centuries, is lost. Along with the way of life, the morality and chastity of people has been lost. (FM: Internet, VK 2010)

Many aspects of everyday life in kin domains are filled with traditional markers where references to traditions are more important than the real practice of these traditions. Anastasians declare the strive for traditional values, which include a central role for family and children, a strict division of gender roles, including in the professional sphere, premarital chastity and the denial of homosexuality:[13]

> But the recent trends of last years tell us so, that for some reason, out of some considerations, I don't know, their... their, shall we say, contribution has been made since Clara Zetkin and Rosa Luxemburg, that man and woman – they are the same. Well, equal. And by... if you naturally take.... We have now gone a little sideways. To take a more natural approach to this, it is in principle impossible for them to be the same. A woman – she gives life, she gives birth. How can a man give birth?! Forgive me! If he gives birth, he is no longer a man, he is already a woman. (FM: Interview, male, 42)

Meanwhile, everyone understands this 'traditional way' as part of one's own path, first of all, playing with its symbolic meaning. For example, neo-Pagans view tradition as a main value while at the same time feeling free to interpret it, choosing perhaps between different pre-Christian customs, etc. (Aitamurto 2006: 200). Wearing *sarafan*[14] or *kosovorotka*[15], the Anastasians emphasise their involvement in the Slavic Vedic culture, thus distinguishing between 'us' and 'them'. For Anastasians the notions of 'new' and 'traditional' speak more about the attitude to this or that phenomenon than describes reality. They can choose different symbolically significant moments to define them 'traditional' (Handler and Linnekin 1984: 273). Their traditional dress for special events are contemporary interpretation of the peasant clothes.

Laura Olson in her book *Performing of Russia* investigates how Russian folk music is performed on the stage and shows the role of folk culture in the process of representing Russia as a whole. The manipulation of folklore is resorted to both by state officials to establish a sense of loyalty to the state and by intellectuals. In both cases, citizens use rural culture as the most authentic for cultivating a sense of national belonging. Any objects and actions that can be described as 'national' are necessarily highly valued. (Olson 2004: 3–6) Moreover, this 'folk reality' is perceived as an authentic past.

In the case of the Anastasian movement, the initiative to create folk traditions is taken over by activists, sometimes with specialised professional training of acting, stage speech, or musical performances. Very often on holidays such as Kupala Night (Ivan Kupala holiday[16]) the *khorovod*[17] dance is accompanied by instructions of the specialist. Some traditions are rather new but presented as an old and pure custom from the imagined Vedic times. For example, the wedding ceremony in a kin domain is a ritual described in Megre's book, although the Anastasians practice it as a Vedic custom as well as *Maslenitsa*.[18]

The invention of tradition is not contradictory for the inventors. They strive for authenticity but understand it very broadly. Anna Fedele, describing the ritual creativity of New Age pilgrims to Mary Magdalene, says that they loosely mix together elements of different traditions, explaining it by inspiration and visions of the past. These rituals are not standardised for everyone "but rather created ad hoc for each situation" (Fedele 2013: 19). In the Russian case, the urban dwellers are striving to revive authentic Vedic traditions but acknowledge today's altered context, insufficient 'awareness' and the purity of thought of the modern person. That is why the necessary indulgence is a possibility to restore the "spirit of tradition", which is more important than a "dead religious canon" (Aitamurto 2010: 104).

Most importantly, the invention of tradition is highly selective: only some significant aspects are chosen to represent national traditional culture. They are associated with

the rural lifestyle and are perceived as natural – while others are ignored or only partially exploited (Handler and Linnekin 1984: 279–280). What seems to Anastasians to be irrational or imported from the outside, they throw out of their view and dismiss as a late addition to ancient culture. As Jocelyn Lynnekin (1983: 242) points out, many modern Hawaiians believe that isolated rural areas are an example of a traditional lifestyle. However, Hawaiian tradition is a static and timeless model for them, where present and past, time and space are regularly confused.

Anastasians, like the pagans,[19] describe their traditions in terms of restoring what has been lost, but they do not hide the fact that they are creating a modern tradition suitable for the present age. They use historical and archaeological evidence, more as a source of creativity than as real grounds to reconstruct a bygone culture (Harvey 2007: 283–284). In general, doing something only because it is traditional means reinterpreting and thus changing tradition (Handler and Linnekin 1984: 281). The possibility of today's independent interpretation of the doctrine seems quite real to the Anastasians. 'Ritual creativity', aimed primarily at making the rite, is one of the important features of modern non-institutional religiosity (Fedele and Knibbe 2013: 7).

Anastasians reviving ancestral traditions are, in fact, working out the standards and models according to which other participants of the movement will act. Of course, these templates are locally determined, and each region, city or area has its own authority figures, although they do not exist in an enclosed space, and, one way or another, share their data over the Internet or during random contact.

IVAN-CHAY (IVAN TEA)

The relative remoteness of kin domains from the cities makes the Anastasians look for different ways to earn money. Apart from distance work, rental housing, and pensions, they try to find sources of income at the location. Along with construction and agriculture, they turn to cultural projects in the local area. In particular, newcomers develop regional tourism, collect and construct local history and legends, organise folk holidays and festivals, do handicrafts. In other words, the commodification of local culture and tradition is one of the resources they try to use.

One of the most popular products of intentional communities is Ivan-chay,[20] which they present as an indigenous and authentic beverage of the Russian people. Residents not only collect the plant (*Epilobium angustifolium L.*) and brew Ivan-chay, they are also developing sophisticated fermentation techniques. Russian New Agers attribute traditional practices of tea-making and tea-drinking to the lost ancient Russian civilisation. There are no historical sources to prove it. The identification of herbal tea as a Russian tea is especially relevant for producers who live in ecovillages. As evidence of its usefulness and demand, they explain that previously Ivan-chay was widely used not only in Russia but also broadly exported abroad. This legend is widely circulated on the Internet,[21] and according to conspiracy theories, Ivan-chay is vanishing because of a secret agreement between Western producers. Because it competed with Indian tea, the East India Tea Company has spread false information, saying that Ivan-chay is rubbed with white clay, after which its sales first reduced and then stopped altogether. This caused the loss of export sales and replacement with Indian tea.

Researchers of wild plants in Eastern Europe note the increased popularity of Ivan-chay and its 'glorious' history in Russian-speaking social media. Most of these articles are very recent and published in the last six to seven years (Prakofjewa et al. 2020: 2). While it is being promoted as a Russian national drink within Russia and elsewhere, the majority of their interviewees "claimed that it is something they had learned recently from community members or relatives, or read in books or on the Internet" (Kalle et al. 2020: 3). Even those who referred to the use of Ivan-chay in the past could not give any further details on the complicated methods of fermentation. Moreover, many of them "said that they are still learning the right way to ferment it or had abandoned this use because they were not able to reproduce the required technological standard and complained about the time-consuming nature of the work" (ibid.). Very few enthusiasts in Estonia and Finland reported fermenting Epilobium angustifolium, but this is due to their interest in a healthy lifestyle and herbs (ibid.).

Yelena Berezovich (2014: 143–148), describing the notions that foreigners have about Russian food, also investigates Russian tea and concludes that she could not find any mentions of Ivan-chay as a Russian tea in any of the dictionaries of foreign words. She discovered at least six other meanings of Russian tea[22] that have nothing to do with what is offered as such by the Anastasians. The historian Ivan Sokolov (2014: 29) proves that these legends are unreliable, and Ivan-chay was a convenient raw material to use as counterfeit Chinese tea, which is why the state tried to forbid its manufacture. Russian farmers used to drink this herb as a substitute for tea because it was very expensive and unavailable to the majority of the population. The fermented version of Ivan-chay has not been encountered before as it is a practice that has spread predominantely within the last five years (Prakofjewa et al. 2020: 2).

Always when you visit kin domains the ecovillagers serve Ivan-chay. For everyone the choice of drink is obvious: you cannot have any other foreign and harmful beverages when there is such a useful, fresh and authentic herb. Moving to kin domains from the cities new farmers have some problems making a living, so selling 'traditional' products is one of the resources available to get some money. However, suppliers other than Anastasians have made the same commercial move.

Ivan-chay is now produced by more than a hundred enterprises across the country. It went on sale in the early 2010s and immediately became legendary. In the near future May Foods, better known for its May Tea trademark, will open a large production facility in the Vologda region (Postnov et al. 2019: 253). In the Kostroma region, the first sale of Ivan-chay appeared in 2013 (ibid.: 254). Because of the high prices, Ivan-chay is rarely sold in the supermarkets in the Kostroma region but rather is labelled as a regional tourism brand (ibid.: 254–255). Some agricultural specialists support the conspiracy theory that emphasises good qualities of Russian tea and refers to the special decree of 1815 that forbade the production and sale of Ivan-chay (Sycheva et al. 2016: 83). This document actually existed but was aimed at combating falsification. Ivan-chay, however, was not the only or the main problem of the tea trade, even in terms of counterfeiting, as it was inferior to 'second-hand tea' (*spitoy chay*) (Sadovskiy and Sokolov 2017: 34).

Salespeople for Ivan-chay orient the potential audience to the glorious past. They sell not only the products but also information and services. For example, there are special tours to ecological and spiritual places to collect medicinal herbs, especially Ivan-

chay. Moreover, the advertising promises that Ivan-chay has a healing and relaxing effect on people. Researchers admit, "in the Russian Federation Ivan-chay is drifting toward becoming a national culinary practice in which the taste, properties and relation to identity are regarded as the most important features of the drink" (Prakofjewa et al. 2020: 9).

It is not only a New Agers' brand, you can also find it in many organic shops, museums, Orthodox and esoteric stalls and even in supermarkets. All of these outlets promise the same curative effect. The Anastasians say that apart from the internal market (among like-minded people) Ivan-chay is better sold in souvenir shops than in supermarkets primarily to Russian customers, who are familiar with Ivan-chay's glorious past. This shows that tea is more symbolic than a truly traditional product. So, the majority of consumers are inhabitants of these ecovillages, like-minded people in the cities and herbal tea amateurs.

RUSSIAN TEA FESTIVAL

Among the Anastasians interested in the revival of traditions, a group of experts can be distinguished. They spread information about ancestral customs and teach others how to interpret and reproduce folk customs and holidays. Usually, they use appropriate clothing (*sarafan*, *kosovorotka*), accessories (embroidery, *ochel'e*[23]), and lexical[24] features to give their performance the necessary flavour. When arranging specialised activities, these experts dress in *sarafans* and folk shirts and pronounce the appropriate words for the situation and environment. In addition to the Anastasians, a wide public usually attends such events and activities, although many are close to the ideas of New Age, as well as some of the idyll of life in nature.

The founders of the Grishino ecovillage in the Leningrad region[25] were among the first to start collecting and selling Ivan-chay. For several years before the pandemic they held an annual festival of Russian tea with support of the local administration. I visited one of these celebrations in 2016. Sales of Ivan-chay and other folk goods at this celebration were accompanied by folk dances and music, baking bread in the oven, and a tea-making masterclass. Numerous Ivan-chay festivals are organised throughout Russia, which have a similar structure and are combined with fairs. This holiday usually includes fermentation workshops and demonstrations (Prakofjewa et al. 2020: 8).

The celebration of a national holiday is one of the most popular in the work of rural culture houses: following annual plans, each cultural and leisure institution in the region prepares a program for New Year, Russia Day and the Day of National Unity (Gavrilova 2016: 27). The Russian Tea Day holiday was also one of the activities associated with mass events funded by the local administration. Their involvement highlights the lack of clarity in the choice of sources: the ethnographic facade is sufficient for both officials and cultural specialists, and references to the Vedic past do not seem unreliable to them.

The main visitors to these festivals are local people from neighbouring villages and town centers who went on buses organised by the local government. They see this event as entertainment like *Maslenitsa* or the New Year holiday. Most of them have the herb

used to make Ivan-chay on their land but do not collect it and do not drink the tea. Some of them cannot even remember the name of this tea, calling it just herbal tea. They like the folk dresses of New Agers, perceiving the event more as a carnival than anything ideological. They are proud of their neighbours because these newcomers are educated urban people who have beautiful costumes and can work with their hands. They also appreciate the opportunity to have fun, dance and play folk games. The locals buy the packed tea as a souvenir to give to their relatives and neighbours. Meanwhile, they buy Ivan-chay from various manufacturers who sell their products at the festival, not stressing the local herb of Grishino. Of course, there are also those who are unhappy with the invasion of "sectartians" and their "pagan" propaganda but most locals do not see any esoteric ideas in the ongoing event.

The ecovillagers try to teach local people how to harvest, brew and drink Russian tea, distributing the product and the stories about Russian lost tradition. The latter correlates with the ideas of the folklore movement, which views original Russian folklore as forgotten and incomprehensible to the modern village, requiring academic interpretation and consistent teaching (Olson 2004: 184, 121). That is, by teaching the locals, the ecovillagers are not much different from ordinary cultural workers who similarly reinterpret and popularise lost texts and practices. "The coordinators of cultural institutions still feel responsible for the public holidays of the city or village and they are still seen as experts in what kind of culture is right for the people" (Gavrilova 2016: 38).

CONCLUSION

New religious movements may use elements of traditional folklore to their advantage in the same way that people in traditional religions or government programes do. In the Anastasian community, it is considered necessary to return to the traditions that existed in the Golden Age of humankind. The books *The Ringing Cedars of Russia* are undoubtedly the theoretical and practical basis for much of the practices invented by Anastasians. The impossibility to realise in full 'traditions' offered by the author leads to the fact that they are constantly being supplemented and transformed. The 'traditional' and 'organic' labels increase the price of many of the goods and services offered on the ecovillages.

New Age is often presented in the public sphere as a commercial movement that centers its ideas on the money issue (Mikaelsson 2014). The world-affirming mood includes material prosperity and self-spirituality, which was extensively described by Paul Heelas (2008). New Age ecovillagers are very inventive in selling different services and products to urban society and praise well-being, but still cannot forget about the mysterious Russian soul and do not want to compromise on specific questions such as gender equality and the capitalist economy. Rejecting Western lifestyle and values, they still view and use original and authentic tradition as a service and commodity.

NOTES

1 The Series includes 10 parts, published between 1996 and 2010. In 2019 an updated version of the first book was released. Some examples of book names are *Anastasia* (2005a [1996]), *The Space of Love* (2005b [1998]), *Co-creation* (2006 [1999]), *The Book of Kin* (2007a [2002]).

2 Megre quotes Anastasia's words about the healing power of his works:

In the book you are going to write there will be unobstrusive combinations, formulations made up of letters, and they will arouse in the majority of people good and radiat feeling. […] Through you I want to open myself to everyone. […] And you will write down what I have said. And that is how my combinations of letters will fall into place in your book. (Megre 2005a [1996]: 144–146)

3 Data are from Megre's official website (Megre: Novosibirsk). The site also provides examples of book covers in foreign languages (Megre: official editions).

4 See Megre: official website; Ringing Cedars of Russia.

5 See Anastasia Foundation.

6 For example, see Settlements; Ancestral settlement of Milenki; Rodovoye; Shakirova 2018.

7 For more information, see Settlements: Statistics.

8 See Global Ecovillage Network.

9 See Russian Ecovillages and Initiatives Union.

10 For example, this question came up during Diana Christian's visit to Russian ecovillages where she shared her experience of building successful intentional communities. She is the author of *Creating a Life Together: Practical Tools to Grow Ecovillages and Intentional Communities* (2003) and *Finding Community: How to Join an Ecovillage or Intentional Community* (2007). The Russian settlers noted similarities in community-building challenges and the superiority of eco-technologies in Western ecovillages. However, the family issue and the rotation of residents showed them a fundamental difference between the projects. (Ivchenko 2018)

11 "We are Asians, Europeans and Russians, as well as those who recently called themselves Americans – in fact, god-people, all from a single Vedruss civilization. There was an age of life on our planet known as Vedic Age." (Megre 2007a [2002]: 94)

12 Marlene Laruelle (2019: 7) offers four directions for Russian nationalism: imperial, eastern Slavic, ethnic Russian, and *Rossiiskii nationalism*. The Anastasians can interpret 'national' in different ways, such as imperial, eastern Slavic, ethnic Russian and even *Rossiiskii* heritage. They rarely talk about national traditions, more often mentioning 'ours', understanding them as Slavic, Russian, Vedruss, or Vedic.

13 This is a typical reaction on homosexual issues among Anastasians:

Gays can be corrected, I guess. How will they reproduce? You have to have children, how else? You need children to have a happy family. […] Such people have some mistake anyway, or their parents made some mistake. Anyway, there's a reason for that, there's some kind of aberration. There shouldn't be such a thing. It has to be corrected. Those people who will live in kin's domain, they won't have that, it's an urban social phenomenon. (FM: Interview, female, 29)

14 *Sarafan* is a Russian women's folk dress.

15 *Kosovorotka* (*kosoy vorot* means a 'skewed collar') is a traditional Russian long-sleeved shirt.

16 Ivan Kupala's holiday (St. John's Day) is a traditional eastern Slavic holiday related to the summer solstice. On Ivan Kupala Night, young people wear wreaths symbolising purity, people sing and dance around bonfires and jump over them. It is believed that the acts of jumping over bonfires and water pouring purify people and have curative powers.

17 *Khorovod* is an eastern Slavic dance combining a circle dance and chorus singing.

18 *Maslenitsa* (*maslo* means 'butter') is an eastern Slavic folk festival held at the end of February, marking the start of Lent. It marks the end of winter and the beginning of spring.

19 Some of the Anastasians are drawn to the ideas and literature of the Rodnovers. Sometimes a settlement may even have a ritual square (*kapishche*) where Rodnovers perform rituals. But still, the Anastasians usually stay away even though they sympathise with Rodnovers' views.

20 Also called *kiprey* or *koporskiy chay*.

21 For example, see here Ivan-chay; Kos'minskiy; Russian Tea.

22 First of all, it is tea grown in Russia. Secondly, in some European countries, this is the name of black tea. Thirdly, tea with lemon is often called Russian tea. The fourth meaning is connected with the technology of making tea: to pour tea from the teapot and then add hot water. Fifthly, in some cultures, it is called artificial tea from herbs or honey. And sometimes it was a synonym for vodka. (Berezovich 2014: 143–148)

23 *Ochel'e* is a handband made in a folk style.

24 They prefer to use archaic Russian words like *dobro* ('okay') instead of okay, *vedat'* ('to know') instead of *znat'*, address young people as *dobry molodtsy* ('young men') and *krasny devitsy* ('young women') instead of *yunoshi* and *devushki*; and many others. Some of them violate the rules of the modern Russian language and avoid the prefix *bes* (*bes* refers to 'without' but also means 'devil') because it reminds them of 'dark forces'. For example, they can pronounce and write *bezplatno* instead of the correct spelling *besplatno* ('for free').

25 They started their project in the early 1990s before the *Ringing Cedars* books, later participated in many activities of the Anastasian settlements. Although the founders are more oriented to the international experience of ecovillages and Indian spirituality, today their ideology is very close to kin domains, and among their guests and residents are the Anastasians.

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FM = Author's fieldwork materials, 2009–2021. Materials are kept in the author's personal collection. For interviews, the following metadata is provided: the interviewees' sex and age.

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