

BOOK REVIEW: VERNACULAR KNOWLEDGE:
CONTESTING AUTHORITIES, EXPRESSING BELIEFS

Valk, Ülo, and Marion Bowman, eds. 2022. *Vernacular Knowledge: Contesting Authorities, Expressing Beliefs*. Sheffield; Bristol: Equinox Publishing Ltd. 423 pages.

The book *Vernacular Knowledge: Contesting Authorities, Expressing Beliefs* is an outstanding edited volume of articles dedicated to Leonard Norman Primiano, his method and research legacy. The concept of vernacular knowledge, as addressed in the volume, derives from the methodology and conceptual understanding of Primiano's "vernacular religion" approach. By redefining knowledge in connection to beliefs as linking, etiological and explanatory tools, it bridged the gap between the Western perception of knowledge as scientific and beliefs as irrational and unproved. At its core, the concept contests the widespread idea of a rational and literate West versus a spiritual, oral, and intuitive rest of the world, emphasising beliefs in a broad meaning as an embedded instrument of perception and understanding. The conceptual contribution of the volume lies in equating beliefs to a form of knowledge, because, as Ülo Valk (p. 10) with reference to Marilyn Motz (1998: 340) explains in the Introduction: "Belief does not suspend or exclude knowledge, but validates it, and 'we can examine the process of believing as a way of knowing'".

The volume consists of 16 chapters grouped into five thematic parts that cover a broad geographical scale, as well as representing various cultural and religious traditions. The review will concentrate on the book's highlights from my own perspective, as well as bringing to the readers' attention chapters by lesser-known authors. The book contains chapters delivered by well-known authors in the field of folkloristics, such as Marion Bowman, Ülo Valk, Leon-

ard Primiano, and Robert Glenn Howard. Bowman's contribution, "Negotiating Vernacular Authority, Legitimacy and Power: Creativity, Ambiguity and Materiality in Devotion to Gauchito Gil", focuses on the material expression of vernacular Catholic beliefs about Argentinian local religious figure Gauchito Gil. Valk's chapter, "Truth, Variation and the Legendry: The Case of Saint Madhavadeva's Birthplace in Assam", investigates the placelore and belief narratives about a neo-Vaishnavian cultural hero Madhavadeva whose figure produces knowledge that contests the official religious discourse in Assam. In their respective theoretically rich chapters, Primiano, in "The Upper Room: Domestic Space, Vernacular Religion, and Observant University Catholic", explores the relationships between vernacular religion and the individual, as well as how the surrounding community shapes the individual, while Howard, in "When a Cosmic Shift Fails: The Power of Vernacular Authority in a New Age Internet Forum", concentrates on vernacular authorities in participatory media, introducing the term "aggregate volition" (p. 166).

By problematising and in a way 'queering' the concept of knowledge, the current volume raises the question of vernacular authorities. Seeing knowledge and its authorities as power is a very Foucauldian way of approaching world hierarchies and power relationships. It is expressed clearly in Anastasiya Astapova's chapter "In Quest of Lost Heritage, Ethnic Identity, and Democracy: The Belarussian Case", which investigates the ideological meaning of the

first Belarusian historical novel, by Uladzimir Karatkevich, *The Ears of Rye Under Thy Sickle* (1965), also known as *The Magic Book*, in relation to knowledge production about the Belarusian national idea. The novel undermines the official political discourse and complies with the regime at the same time. The chapter shows *The Magic Book*, its sequels and its author to evoke legends and beliefs so powerful and dangerous that the “power of legend” could become “instrumental” (p. 30) and boost the formation of the Belarusian national idea and identity. As one of the interlocutors says in the chapter: “This turns into the legend: since people respond to it, it is not some archival or critics’ information anymore” (ibid.). The chapter explores the ideological, identity- and nation-building aspects of knowledge that are embedded in and constructed around objects of historical and national importance, including the above-mentioned novel, the Cross of Saint Euphrosyne (1161), and the Kurapaty graveyard (1937–1941).

Astapova’s contribution is placed in an especially intriguing part of the volume, *Politics and Vernacular Strategies of Resistance*. This section is dedicated to the analysis of vernacular knowledge produced in post-Soviet societies serving as a form of religious and intellectual resistance against the hegemonic power of Tsarist and Soviet Russia. It also deals with the concept of ‘true’ knowledge, religion, and history. Specifically, James A. Kapaló’s chapter “Visual Media and the Reconfiguration of Divinity in Moldovan Radical Religion” concentrates on Inochentism, a branch of Orthodox Church among Moldovans in Bessarabia, Podillia (Podolie) and Kherson. This religious movement emerged at the beginning of the 20th century under the influence of the “Orthodox monk Inochentie of Balta” (p. 71) and embodied a religious revival that is often referred to by the devotees as true Orthodoxy. The chapter dives into the idea of a “relationship with divine and heavenly agents” (ibid.) and how it is represented in

icons, photos, and photomontages that display the founder (Inochentie) and his successors as the embodiment of The Holy Spirit, Elijah and Enoch, and the Spirit of the Truth. Meanwhile, according to Kapaló, Archangel Michael is the holy embodiment of Archangelism – a branch of Inochentism from the 1920s. The author addresses the differences in perception, formation, and transformation of the religious branch between Tsarist Russia (later the Soviet Union) and Greater Romania. Excessive persecutions of the religion and its devotees led to the shift from liturgy in churches to secret ritual places and gave rise to elaborate iconography – a shift integral to the time, circumstances, and region. The author elaborates on the exceptional role of iconography in new media including the role of photomontages in establishing and keeping the meaning of the “Men of God” as the constituents and the embodiment of the leading figures of the movement.

Among other valuable discoveries in the volume is the chapter “Blessing beyond Time and Place: The Fluid Nature of Narrative Tradition in Contemporary Hinduism” by Martin Wood. It investigates the image of the Hindu Saint Jalaram Bapa of Virpu through the scope of memory as a source of knowledge production among his numerous devotees in India, East Africa, and the UK. It analyses memories about his life and miracles and the impact of the memory-produced stories on his hagiography. The chapter looks at knowledge from the perspective of orality as “authenticity” and written form as compliance with the Western model of approval upon the existence of knowledge. In addition, the chapter provides rich material about the oral and written sources, as well as debates and concerns about the cinematographic or other visual representation of Jalaram Bapa by devotees and non-devotees. The author also draws a connection between the memories of the saint and his miracles after his death among non-devotees.

A close look into the marginalised Indian traditions within the official discourse of knowledge and its legitimacy is represented in the chapter “Unearthing the Narratives of the Róngkups of Sikkim: From Vernacular Alternatives to Institutionalized Beliefs” by Reep Pandi Lepcha. The author delineates three indigenous etiological narratives and analyses how they co-exist with, and contradict the distribution of, ethnical, religious, and geopolitical power in a process of adjusting core narratives of identity and grass-rooting to state politics. Lepcha explains how “narratives serve as tools for indigenous communities to voice insecurities, while state authorities use them as vehicles for imposition of an institutionalized understanding of situations in order to quell ethnic differences” (p. 157).

Insightful research on Mongolian beliefs related to the afterlife and their connection to place-lore is delivered in the chapter “An Immured Souls: Contested Ritual Tradition and Demonological Narratives in Contemporary Mongolia” by Alevtina Solovyeva. The author draws on the tradition of *güideltei gazar* (‘restless places’) where the “motif... [of] a human stuck in a supernatural locus” (p. 364) occurs. The research reveals the contradiction that appeared due to the differences between vernacular religious practices and the attempts to “institute inhumation as the official form of funeral” (p. 368) and led to a transformation in beliefs and perception of the restless places of the immured souls.

Overall, the volume implies the idea of knowledge as power, used as a tool for maintaining control. Meanwhile, vernacular knowledge production and the establishment of vernacular authorities redefine and reinvent its connotation, endowing it with new meanings and spheres of influence. The volume will be of significant interest to those who work on beliefs, belief narratives, religion, conspiracy theories, New Age movements or internet cultures, and those who work with the concept of power, as

well as folklorists and ethnologists in general. Insightful ideas and rich material make the reviewed volume a valuable theoretical and practical source in times of re-emerged and redefined spirituality and power-shifting historical changes.

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