Podcast Transcript

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Narrating Belief: Vernacular Religion in India

Podcast with **Ülo Valk** (2 March 2020).

Interviewed by **Sidney Castillo.**

Transcribed by **Helen Bradstock**.

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Sidney Castillo (**SC**): *And now we are back with a Religious Studies Project Podcast. Now the EASR 2019, in Tartu Estonia, is officially over. But we are still here – because we like to work a lot, and hard! We are still doing podcast interviews. And now I'm happy to have Ülo Valk, from the University of Tartu, here with me in the podcast. Welcome, Professor Valk, to the Religious Studies Project!*

Ülo Valk (**ÜV**): Well, thank you. And welcome to the Department of Estonian and Comparative Folklore. We are sitting here in this library. And the folkloristics of religion . . . this approach is one that we're introducing here at the University of Tartu. And perhaps we will talk about this as well: what makes it different from other approaches that we . . . . We have so many examples, so many possible methodologies and conceptual tools that we discussed during the conference.

SC: *Exactly. It's very stimulating to be in a room like this, because we are in an academic ambient context. So we can ask the questions properly . . . . But first I would like to do a brief introduction for Professor Valk. Dr Ülo Valk is Professor of Estonian and Comparative Folklore at the University of Tartu. His publications include* The Black Gentleman: Manifestations of the Devil in Estonian Folk Religion *and two edited volumes:* Vernacular Religion in Everyday Life *and* Storied and Supernatural Places*. His recent research has focussed on belief narratives, place lore, folklore in social contexts and vernacular Hinduism. So I will just dive in with the questions. And I would like to ask this question to try to situate our Listeners, a little bit. How can we understand folk religion and its relationship with the supernatural?*

ÜV: Well you used the concept of folk religion and perhaps that's where we'll start. It used to be a traditional way of talking about folk beliefs as a kind of survival. Folk religion appeared as a kind-of set of old beliefs and practices that was in opposition to the institutionalised religion, like Christianity.

And that's definitely not the way we understand it today. And the shift has been away actually from folk religion as some kind of topic or some kind of system of belief, thoughts, methodologies, theory and approaches. Folk religion offers one way to view religious phenomena as cultural phenomena. And if we talk about folk religion we talk more about the community; what is shared between the people. And it includes shared forms of expressions that we call genres. But then there is another approach, and that's what we call vernacular religion. It is seeing religion through this lens of vernacularity. And this concept was introduced by Leonard Primiano, an American folklorist. And folklorists have been talking about vernacular culture in many connections, you can take (audio unclear) or Richard Bauman. But what makes the vernacular approach different from studying folk religion is that it's more focussed on individuality, on subject and on creativity. Well folk, as you can understand it, talks about a group of people and something that is shared. But vernacularity is more about . . . it shows the dynamics of religion on an individual level. And it also includes this ambiguous relationship with institutionalised forms and with power – with authority. So the two are not synonyms.

SC: *Oh. That's very good to know.*

ÜV: That something that's a common mistake. I know my colleague, Leonard Primiano, he's often quite disappointed when he see that his concept of vernacular religion has been used just to replace the old-fashioned word – the word folk. Both of them are useful, but it's good to see them as two closely connected but still different approaches. Now to the question of the supernatural – and of course we know, originally, it's a kind-of theological or philosophical term. And there is also a discussion that perhaps we should not use it at all, because it's a kind-of Western concept. And there are so many cultures in the world that don't use this. It's kind-of intellectual colonialism, or something like this. But when you look at the situation, well, in European . . . in many countries, the term has been turned into a vernacular concept (**5:00**). It has become an emic term, with a huge field of meanings. And I find these concepts quite helpful. Sometimes words, if they become very technical, very narrow terms, they are not so useful to make sense of phenomena like religion, or culture. Because the semantic field is so broad. But as people who work from this perspective, a folkloristic study of religion, we mainly work with textual material. So our focus is connected to discourse, to verbal expressions, different kinds of genres. And we see, also, the supernatural as a function, as an expressive mode of certain genres. And this is related to the enchantment of the world. We see that the world is composed of many different outlooks, possibilities to understand this, and then these are connected to the modes of expression. And in folklore we talk a lot about genres. These genres are connected with tradition and they offer different perspectives, different outlooks on the world. And that's a kind-of Bakhtinian

approach Bakhtin spoke about the speech genres. So that's very close to what we are doing.

SC: *That's a very good start to help make a differentiation between concepts. Because oftentimes, as you say, they are either used as synonyms or overlap one with the other. So now that we got that clear, in your presentation at the EASR you touched one of those topics that was the difference between truth and belief. So now I would like to ask: truth and belief are categories constantly in dispute in the study of religion. How can we develop a useful approach to study them?*

ÜV: Yes, well that's a big question. We know that in Western epistemology - how knowledge is generally defined around Estonia it is justified through belief. So the question is how the justification works, or what makes some arguments valid and the others not valid. But exactly I think that these two concepts are not enough. It's much better to have more words. Like one of the keynote lectures that was given by Lotta Tarkka, Professor of Folklore Studies from Helsinki, spoke a lot about imagination. And now we have truth, belief, imagination and definitely knowledge. And to refer to the work of one philosopher, Paul Hoyningen-Huene, who has written about how knowledge is produced in the sciences. And he has shown that what makes scientific knowledge different is not so much its content, if compared with everyday knowledge, but its systematicity. Scientific knowledge is systematic. But what you can call vernacular knowledge is connected to belief and truth. It is more disordered, more loose. It is open, it is also systematically open. And of course it's connected with different forms of expression. As scientists, or scholars of religion, we are used to giving lectures, or we write articles, or we write monographs. And there are certain rules for those genres. But if I talk with you, just person-to-person, and I would like to share with you, for example, some loose narratives from Tartu, or some people who have had some trouble with aliens or UFOs, it would be another very informal form of communication and form of genre. And it's interesting how these arguments of belief are made in these genres. They're different from the scientific argumentation that is systematic, that relates to the previous . . . – or it should at least – and connected to the quantitative approach, very often. But, for example, if I have to convince you that the neighbouring house – the Restaurant Verner, the Café Verner – it's a very haunted house (**10:00**). Well, my daughter used to work there as a waitress years ago. And she told me there was this tradition of story-telling, among the young waitresses, that the house was haunted: that they heard some footsteps, and some lights, and it was a bit scary to be the last person in the building. And it was very interesting to for me to see this incipient tradition like this: how young people work together in an old house, and how this tradition is emerging, and how to conceptualise this. Is it . . . well, it's a belief, a narrative. Because, of course, we have a lot of questions and in our rational world. We are generally sceptical, but this all belongs to this genre that we call memorates or legends, also expressing doubt and disbelief and expressing

disagreements. So I think the concept of a belief is useful, because it doesn't fix the meaning. It expresses a kind of modality towards the ways of how we see the world, how we discuss it. And truth, of course, it's a big word. And it's not very common to talk about this in vernacular . . . in oral communication. It's more a question about the goal of scholarship and it's also a religious concept, because all religions are somehow . . . they're truth, or they're connected with this.

SC: *Through institutions sometimes. I think, having looked at all of these concepts, we will dive more into your research. And this is the next question I want to orientate towards your EASR presentation. You presented data on "The Mayong of North India: an everyday understanding of supernatural practices". How does this case give insight on the different ways people relate to the different facts of experience?*

ÜV: Well I have been visiting some places in North east India, in Assam, for many years. And one of them is this famous cluster of villages known as Mayong. It's famous for magical knowledge, magical practices, *tantra-mantra*. And I have discovered there are many *bej*es, magicians. There are perhaps around one hundred, or nearly one hundred semi-professional, professional magicians who specialise in snake bites, who are dealing with exorcism, or who is more skilled in divination, etc. And there is also a very lively story-telling tradition among them and about these *bej*es. A lot of stories are projected into the past. They talk for example about human-animal transformations. The tigers – who were very active in this region – now there is no jungle, very little jungle is left, the tigers are gone. And there were these classical stories about magical flights and fights between the b*ej*es, the magicians: magical fights, and also murders by black magical kind-of tricks that were made with the visitors. And it's interesting to see how the story world, how it functions, how it empowers also the magical practices. It somehow builds up this aura of the place, this knowledge of a place as a special place. Otherwise it would have been just an ordinary Assamese village. There is nothing there that makes it unique or distinct. But this shows how common story-telling, how it works to enchant a place and also authorise . . . to give power to the people who practice and carry on the traditions there.

SC: *Yes. And speaking about this re-enchantment, you spoke about this as well. And there are mechanisms of enchantment, like in the case of this village. Could you speak a little more about that?*

ÜV: Well, in this village, what has been quite surprising for me is to see how lively the tradition of the *mantras* is. It in two ways: there are magical manuscripts and often they are kept in the families and they give also a kind of authority to the *bej*es. They don't always use them to recite them, but it's a source of magical power. On the other hand, sometimes they are considered dangerous. So to continue

the tradition they are burned on the pyre (**15:00**). Or they are thrown into a river. Because there is this idea that the *mantras* are connected with certain deities, goddesses, and they need worship, they need sacrifice, for example. If you don't do this, then they turn against you. So there are many scripts, certain traditions connected to them. But there is a lot of knowledge that is transmitted orally. And many *mantras* are born today, discovered. How the *bej*es they can revive a tradition, or start reading a manuscript, the *mantra*, that has been totally forgotten. They say they don't understand the language. It's not Sanskrit, it's not Hindi. But then they start the reading somehow, and it starts to work. So there's this possibility that tradition can be revived. Also the tradition that is there in the past. For example, the story-world or the knowledge about human-animal transformations. People carry this on. And there is also a belief that it has not gone. It is possible to make it alive again, if necessary. So, again, we see this relationship between practices, and story-world, and belief, and the sense of a place that keeps attracting hundreds and thousands of people who consult them. They come from far away, from big cities. Also educated people, of course, and politicians. There were elections in India recently. So to use this magical knowledge to support running for the parliament is not uncommon. Maybe it's not so public. So this difference between public and private cultures is also there in India.

SC: *Sure. One of the things that I remember from your presentation is also the position you take on vernacular religion (audio unclear). And you have many like vignettes of different magicians describing the process of how to proceed with a particular ritual, or how to make the enchanting of a charm, or to achieve this human transformation into the tiger. It was very, very interesting in the sense that you were focussing on them. Can you speak a little bit more about those cases?*

ÜV: Well now, that's this vernacular dimension of religion. That we are not working with some old, old stuff with some old, old stories. We're just working with people. And the people have the life stories, they have characters, they have specialisations. And I have been working with a few *bej*es – most of them are men – whose life stories are quite different, whose status in the village is different. Some of them have been very poor and some more well-to-do. Most of them belong to the Neo-Vaishnava tradition. That's also an interesting contradiction. Because in Neo-Vaishnava tradition, you're not supposed to worship the goddess, or to be involved in tantric rites. It's more a Bhakti movement, about Krishna, and certain forms of public worship. But how the same people can be carriers of alternative different traditions, and how they shift . . . . I will not say it's shifting between individual identities, but it's shifting between different forms of knowledge, or different forms of religious culture. So some of them have been raising assistant spirits, for example, working with them. There is a lively story-telling tradition about how their mothers have never, never tried this. But of course there are other magicians who use the help of assistant spirits. And there are local Assamese

and there are local Bengali people who come in who carry a different kind of magical tradition. So, to look at this diversity, and to see it on the individual level, it's very, very interesting. And here is the space, or this dimension in religion, that I think we need to work more with these ethnographic methods. And I know that you are an anthropologist, you are a fieldworker, and I think that's what makes our work really fascinating.

SC: *Definitely. To see the outlook of people as it is on its own terms, I think there's a lot of value for scholarship in that. I think I'm going to move to the last question that we have here* (**20:00**). *It's kind-of to understand this dimension of . . . more nuanced, having, not contradiction, but it's just things that cohabit in the same place, at the same time. How is this liminal epistemological uncertainty useful to comprehend religious phenomena? Because you spoke about this . . . .*

ÜV: Yes, well there are these two concepts. What I mean by epistemological uncertainty is that things are not fixed in story-telling. Also the belief narrative, it's quite flexible, an open concept. There is a discussion about the supernatural, what is possible, what is not. Often things are projected into the past. And, well, there is this question that is how to relate to the stories, to take it seriously or not? And that's one of the basic questions in cognition. It's about the decision-making between fact and fictionality – what is true and what is not. And, of course, there are a lot of humorous modalities and not all belief narratives are taken seriously, even when they're transmitted. But in another situation they might start to work to influence the behaviours, the practices of people. And now the concept of liminality – of course, we know it has been taken over from the ritual studies, and it has been applied in so many ways. We can also talk about the liminality between the story-world and the social reality: how experience is turned into a story and how the things that we know from the shared stories can be perceived, or they can become a psychological reality for some people who carry the tradition. It's a kind of liminal world. Or we can talk about temporal liminality between the past – well, in the case of Mayong, the time of great magicians. And today, the magic is reduced, but the contemporary magicians they are like mediators. They can retrieve this knowledge from the past. And the status is also kind-of liminal. Because they know something that is secret. But they bring it to work in a social world. So these areas where things meet, and then mix, and interact, I think these are very, very interesting. A lot of work can be done there.

SC: *Yes. Definitely. I remember that you mentioned about how even they themselves were figuring out if something could be effective. "Maybe, maybe not."*

ÜV: Yes.

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SC*: I think that there is some usefulness in trying address, vernacularly, what people think in everyday life and to understand. Do you have any comment on that? About this "maybe, maybe not?" How we can understand what the usefulness for the study of religion is in general?*

ÜV: So that's also a question about the epistemology, what we can do, and as scholars of course it's a big question that we ask: how to see the boundaries between the world of fiction, and the world of facts, and the reality. But also people who carry these beliefs and ideas, they have similar kind of reflections. We can talk about vernacular theorising. And things are very much left open, so you can make different decisions, and see the world differently. And so I think it is also useful sometimes to see how people actually talk and discuss. Very often, they are aware of different frames of interpretation. And seeing how flexible it is in vernacular discussions, it's also maybe inspiring for scholarship.

SC: *So it has been very, very interesting to have this conversation with you, Professor Valk. I wonder if you have any concluding remarks or ideas for us, for closing the podcast.*

ÜV: Well, you represent anthropology of religion, and I tried to explain the perspective of folkloristics of religion. I think what makes our approaches interesting is that there is never a final conclusion, because also the sources that we're making, they're not ready. They're always in the making. We keep working with people and these vernacular ideas and the practices, they always go ahead (**25:00**). They go beyond. And we need to catch them to understand, to make sense. And that's . . . also it means being on the way, all the time. Being on the move. And thinking about what kind of concepts we need. And if they're becoming very technical, too narrow, they won't be so helpful. So we work always in a dialogue with other people who don't carry this academic burden of academic terminology, and very scientific methodologies. And I think it's always wonderful to learn from them.

SC: *Excellent. I think that's a good way to wrap up the podcast. We thank you again, Professor Valk, for being with us here at the Religious Studies Project. And we hope to have you again, soon.*

ÜV: Thank you for giving me this chance, and I hope to meet you soon at the next conferences.

SC: *Perfect.*

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