Eastern Religions: Tibetan Buddhism, Neo-Hinduism, and a Buriat Shaman in Leningrad

Several charismatic professors, such as Iurii Roerich, Nicholas Roerich’s son, Bidia Dandaron, a Buddhist lama-shaman from Buriatia, as well as the orientalist Lev Gumilev, had a strong impact on the study of ancient religions. They translated Tibetan, Indian (Sanskrit) and Chinese texts as basic sources and thereby conveyed Eastern mysticism into Russian. Some of these scholars lived a dual existence: as university professors on the outside and as initiated spiritual teachers for their disciples in the classical sense of esotericism: by secret transmission of sacred knowledge, by the idea of mediation, the teaching of universal correspondence and all knowledge aimed at a personal transformation as an ultimate goal.

One example of esoteric teaching directly from the East is Bidia Dandaron (1914–1974), who established the first, and for a long time, only Buddhist underground circle in European Soviet Russia. Born and brought up in Buriatia as an initiated monk of Tibetan Buddhism, he had been designated after 1917 as the reincarnated spiritual leader of the planned Buriat-Mongolian theocracy. After these plans failed, Dandaron studied aeronautics in Leningrad, but was arrested in 1937 for an alleged pan-Mongolian conspiracy and sent to prison-camp for ten years. After being released, between 1956 and 1972, he received an affiliation as a lecturer of Indology and Tibetology at Leningrad University, and, still officially ostracized both in Moscow and Leningrad, gathered a secret circle of dedicated disciples, who were initiated by him. Among them were young, later internationally respected scholars, such as Aleksandr Piatigorskii, Boris Smirnov, Oktiabrina Volkova, Iurii Parfionovich and Linnart Miall. Dandaron also established personal contacts with monasteries in Buriatia, Mongolia and Tibet, as a result of which monks regularly came to Leningrad in the 1970s and 1980s and held lectures in private apartments. The lama Dandaron himself was arrested three times for different reasons and spent fourteen years in the GULag, where he died from brutal beatings in 1976. Although most of his disciples also suffered repression, spending years in prison camps, he still has a dedicated following. In 2006, his disciple Vladimir Montlevich published Danderon’s writings and material about him. Since in Buriatia Tibetan Buddhism has always been merged with traditional Shamanism, Dan-

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daron’s influence also represented an influence of Shamanism, the religion of the indigenous people of Siberia.

Another example is Nicholas and Elena Roerich’s second son Iurii Roerich, a professor and considered to be the founder of Tibetology; an internationally renowned indologist. Next to his brother, the painter Sviatoslav Roerich, the impact of Iurii Roerich on the Occult Revival in Russia cannot be overestimated. Together with other close disciples of Roerich, who was repatriated in Novosibirsk from Harbin, Iurii returned to Russia from India in 1957 after his father’s death, and during the last three years of his life was closely engaged with Bidia Dandaron. He, too, gathered a circle of dedicated initiated disciples around him. As his disciple Piatigorskii recalls, Roerich related to him in the same way as Buddha to a Brahmin. The legacy of Roerich’s teachings ranges from so-called “noosferic environmental projects” in Siberia and India to research in bioelectrographic or Kirlian photography.

In the 1970s, students especially of philology and oriental disciplines went on a spiritual quest and began to travel East, some to the Altai, searching for the mystical paradise of Shambhala, about which their teachers had written. Lev Gumilev’s article Strana Shambala v legende i v istorii was a sensation at this time. Some people travelled to Central Asian Republics in search of Sufi teachers, or to the Buddhist republics for Tibetan lama-teachers. Some disguised their quest by joining geological expeditions, which was a frequent way

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74 See Pavel Belikov, Sviatoslav Rerikh. Zhizn’ i tvorchestvo (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnyi Tsentr Rerikhov, 2004).

75 For the reception of the Roerichs in Novosibirsk see John McCannon’s chapter in this volume.


77 According to the Russian geologist Vladimir Vernadskii (1863–1945) the noosphere is the third in a succession of phases of developments of the Earth (after the geosphere, inanimate matter, and the biosphere, biological life), in which, just as the emergence of life fundamentally transformed the geosphere, the emergence of a unified human cognition fundamentally transforms the biosphere (Nauchnaia mys’ kak planetnoe iavlenie, Moscow, 1937). The concept of noosphere has been developed in the 1920 and 1930s by Vernadskii, Teilhard de Chardin and Édouard Le Roy, who taught and met at the Sorbonne in Paris. It has been applied by several Russian and Western scientists, incl. Marshal McLuhan and Eric Raymond. In post-Soviet Russia it has become popular and in the West it is currently researched in the Princeton Global Consciousness Project. (http://noosphere.princeton.edu/)

78 See the materials from the International conference to celebrate Iurii Roerich’s 100th birthday in St. Petersburg in 2005, which in part reads almost as an encyclopedia of esotericism in Russia today. Rerikhovskoe nasledie. Trudy konференсii (St. Petersburg: Irida, 2005).

for members of alternative culture to explore unknown realms of nature and spirituality in the East. Others went on individual esoteric quests. Andrei Terent’ev, a student of orientalism from Leningrad University, established contacts with Tibetan Buddhist lamas in Buriatia. Lamas from the East began to visit Russia, such as the Tibetan monk Bakula Rinpoche, once a Mongolian ambassador in India, and later, in 1979, the well-known lama Namkai Norbu Rinpoche, who fled Tibet in 1959 and established himself as a professor at Naples University, visited Russia from Italy. Terent’ev founded a student association for the study of Buddhism, in which young orientalists like Evgenii Torchinov and Andrei Paribok, who later became academic teachers themselves, searched for deeper esoteric or, as they called it, mystical knowledge and experience than scholarly studies.  

In addition to Buddhism and Shamanism, Neo-Hinduism had an impact on the Russian occulture. As the least institutionalized Eastern religion, it had attracted Russian writers from Nikolai Novikov to Lev Tolstoy and influenced Elena Blavatsky and the Theosophists. One of her main followers, Annie Besant, declared her disciple, the Hindu Jiddu Krishnamurti (1895–1986) an avatar of the New Messiah. Neo-Hinduism had been a concept adapting the Old Vedanta Hindu teachings to modern civilization and classical teachings by Hindu mystics, like Ramakrishna Paramahamsa (1836–1886), had been transferred to the West by Swami Vivekandanda (1863–1902) that attracted many people in the Western counterculture in the 1960–1970s, because they embraced a certain ethical relativism, a pacifist, pantheistic worldview, a mystical eclecticism and a striving for ecstasy, liberating the unconscious from social and other norms. It was also connected to some practices, like yoga and meditation, which connected body and mind and could be applied as unsuspicious health-related methods. In the 1960s, followers and disciples of Nicholas Roerich (Iurii Mamleev, Aleksandr Piatigorskii, A. Syrkin, Tat’iana Elizarenkova, Vladimir Erman, Linnart Miall’ and Oktiabrina Volkova) helped popularize Hindu teachings by translating classical sacred texts, which also circulated in Samizdat, and by publishing a Sanskrit-Estonian dictionary. Although most

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80 Poresh, In: Burdo, Filatov, Sovremenniaia religioznaia zhizn’ (2005), 238–239. Terent’ev in an interview with me on 1 April, 2010.  
81 Nikolai Novikov published the first Russian translation of the Bhagavad Gita (1788); Elena Blavatsky initiated a new translation in 1909.  
scholars opposed the popularization of neo-Hinduism, especially in the Western New Age, some influences began to migrate into Russia, too, and their work had an impact on the occulture.

**Traditionalism Reinvented: Kunta-Yoga**

One of the most bizarre groups representing the “pathogenic belief-system” (Grigorii Reinin) of that time was the *Kunta-Yoga* group around Vladimir Shuktomov (1957–1987) in Leningrad, who became legendary under the name of *Tosha*. (fig. 3)

![Fig. 3: “Tosha” (Vladimir Shuktomov (1957–1987))](image)

In the late 1970s, when young nonconformists, rejecting the ideological rage of political dissidents, inspired by the rock-music of Boris Grebenshchikov, Viktor Tsoi and a hippie counterculture, the young student drop-out with psychic abilities Tosha, who had already practiced solitary survival-training in the tundra, developed a system of symbols and hieroglyphs (*Disa*) which suppos-

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