



## Book Review

**Ülo Valk and Marion Bowman (eds):** *Vernacular Knowledge: Contesting Authority, Expressing Beliefs*. Sheffield: Equinox Publishing, 2022, 423 pp.

The term ‘vernacular’ has emerged in academic discussion in recent decades. It has aimed to inspect the various aspects of the practitioners of a certain religious system more closely. For example, it focuses on individual religious practices rather than institutionalized ones – although the line between these is blurred to say the least. The aim of *Vernacular Knowledge: Contesting Authority, Expressing Beliefs* is to ‘to offer a set of case studies that highlight how vernacular knowledge is made, what techniques are involved, how it is related to vernacular religion and how it might interact/intersect with institutionally approved truths’ (p. 6). This means handling themes of intertwined knowledge, authority, and beliefs, as Ülo Valk explains in the introduction. These themes are also linked to power relations and the maintenance of hierarchies in society and human communication. Vernacular knowledge is rooted in vernacular religion, a term that arises from the fields of folkloristics and the study of religion, both methodologically and theoretically. In the introduction Ülo Valk writes almost poetically of vernacular knowledge: it is in dialogue with institutional actors and is only empowered when institutional

expressions of knowledge seek to oppress it. Vernacular knowledge can be found in visual art or internet memes. It is characterized by subjectivity. Although criticized as emerging from a Christian, and especially protestant tradition, the concept of belief in its fluidity remains valid in the study of religions with both academic and non-academic speakers. The editors aim to transcend the dichotomy between religious and nonreligious, contending that various types of knowledge exist: vernacular, religious, and scientific knowledge all have their basis in ‘some kind of belief’ (p. 6).

The book’s aim is vast, and one could say ambitious. It takes the reader across research fields, past and present. However, a disadvantage is the risk that such vastness might remain superficial in choosing to focus only on certain predetermined aspects of vernacular studies in three or four articles or chapters. However, the book seems to avoid superficiality, as the chapters are well formed and strictly follow the concept of vernacular in their analyses. The book is divided into five sections. Each contains three to four independent chapters. I will next examine these parts and their chapters more closely.

The interaction between vernacular and political power structures is discussed as the ‘Politics and Vernacular Strategies of Resistance’. Vernacular narratives can tell stories of resistance and question authori-

ties. They serve as a means to elucidate issues about which officials may prefer to keep silent. Anastasiya Astapova discusses a controversial book published in 1965. Legends surrounding this book and other Belarusian national heritages have become a way to speak about the Belarusian national spirit without arousing suspicion of a loss of appreciation of the contemporary authorities. Taking the book and its perception solely as a case study would have shifted the focus more to its contemporary uses and illuminated changes in narratives driven by political changes such as the fall of the Soviet Union. Another way to make power structures visible is through humour. Irina Sadovina explores the eco-spiritual Anastasia movement and its utilization of humour within the community. The movement emphasizes the bond between humans and nature. It employs humour to discuss and even critique rules and ideology in a manner reminiscent of the discussion of the ideology of the Soviet Union. Using humour does not necessarily contradict personal beliefs, although individuals may utilize it to critique an authority's dichotomy.

The section 'Narrating and Creating the Past' invites the reader to explore the construction of contemporary communities. Martin Wood's chapter addresses the hagiographical chain of memory that crosses religious traditions in the Jalaram tradition. This chapter's aim is vast, considering the religious materiality of various 'geographical, cultural

and religious contexts' among both Hindu and Muslim practitioners. Unfortunately, the chapter does not quite fulfil these promises, and it would have benefited from a focus on a couple of specific traits within the chain of memory. For example, the final analysis of controversies in non-devotee films seems somewhat disconnected from the chapter's overall theme. Ülo Valk then sets out to discuss the relationship between history and belief narratives in his chapter about the leader of the Bhakti movement, Shankaradeva's birthplace at the turn of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. There is a vast network of vernacular stories, historical information, and folkloric patterns, making it impossible to discern which of the two sites could be the actual birthplace or was the first to attract devotees. By analysing these various narratives told by interviewees from diverse backgrounds, Valk shows how challenging they are to 'facts' from vernacular narratives, and how contradictory they can be. It would have been interesting to read more about the interaction and any challenges between the interviewees and Valk as an outsider in narrating spiritually meaningful locations. Unfortunately, the chapter does not delve into this question.

The 'Renegotiating Tradition and Authority' section takes us to the question of authority. By analysing the *2012Forum* internet forum, Robert Glenn Howard seeks to demonstrate how vernacular authority is formed as an act of aggregate

volition. He analyses four key forum members. Howard shows that the forum remained an important platform for its members for aggregate volition and epideictic deliberation, although the apocalypse's due date had already passed. The chapter tangibly demonstrates through quantitative results how vernacular authority has focused on a few individuals, exploring possible reasons for the concentration of authority. Kristel Kivari approaches non-verbality in the study of vernacular. She examines how practitioners of dowsing in contemporary Estonia experience and narrate supernatural or natural occurrences such as detecting running water underneath the soil through their bodies. Authority in dowsing is established within a community after years of experience and is associated with a certain idea of 'purity' or the non-commercial nature of one's craft. The chapter is generally clear, but it would have benefited from more examples of vernacular narratives.

The 'Vernacular Knowledge and Christianity' section discusses aspects of vernacular and (mainly Catholic) Christianity. As an example of vernacular religion, Melanie Landman applies feminist and Christian approaches to understandings of black Madonnas, revealing controversial perspectives. Some devotees see her as an empowering feminine figure; others believe she has absorbed too much attention within the congregation's life. The chapter thoroughly considers various narratives and their underly-

ing motivations. Before his death Leonard Norman Primiano wrote a chapter for the book in which he emphasizes the significance of the individual practitioner of vernacular religion, specifically focusing on a young catholic student who has been constructing home altars since the age of ten. Also in this chapter Primiano reviews developments in vernacular studies in recent decades and weaves various threads of different approaches together. This is an interesting and valuable read, but it gives the chapter a somewhat dual nature.

The final section discusses the 'Afterlife and Death'. Death and dying are related to vernacular authority. In Mongolia the type of burial, whether inhumation or a traditional burial in the steppes, reflects various authorities' aims of control, as Alevtina Solovyeva discusses. This becomes evident in narratives that describe 'restless places' that can affect living and supranormal creatures alike. The chapter returns us to the book's premise and the theme of vernacular and politics. Paul Cowdell raises the issue of what is lost in translation between the narratives of interviewees and scholars when discussing them in academic settings. By using ghost narratives as a case study, Cowdell illustrates the nuanced nature of vernacular estimations of ghosts. The chapter is rich in references to academic discussions, but this can also be somewhat puzzling, as the thread seems to slip from the reader's grasp, especially at the begin-

ning. Nevertheless, Cowdell's point is important for anyone studying vernacular narratives, serving as a significant wake-up call to acknowledge the diversity of vernacular communication concerning beliefs, knowledges, and doubts, among other nuances.

The afterword, written by Marion Bowman, serves a dual purpose. It summarizes the articles the reader has just read, a placement that might have been more informative in the introduction. Bowman weaves the diverse chapters together, elucidating their significance in the context of the study of vernacular. It also pays tribute to Leonard Norman Primiano (1957–2021), underscoring his indispensable contribution to the field of vernacular studies. Primiano emphasized that 'vernacular' does not supplant but rather enhances our understanding of what has traditionally been termed 'folk'. It is evident that in recent decades the exploration of vernacular has evolved, delving into new realms of research, and ventured into new research questions, which is also reflected in this book's content.

This is a versatile book that examines vernacular from various perspectives. It is a treasury of theories, materials, and methods. The scrutinized articles effectively maintain a focus on exploring vernacular, each bringing its own voice to the theme. However, what is vernacular ultimately? How is it defined? The book provides no definitive conclusion here that will be beneficial for the field's development as the

discussion continues. Vernacular in this book is outlined in opposition to institutions, seeking the experiences of individuals or groups regarding various dimensions of belief. Nevertheless, more geographic variation under certain headings would have been appreciated, for example, in 'Narrating and Creating the Past', and some chapters would have needed a more careful refinement of the research question.

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