

## DEATH AND AFTERWARDS

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For a folklorist all death-related aspects of human life can be divided in two groups:

- 1) ritual, beliefs that begin to operate at the instance of death in the neighbourhood;
- 2) general death-related beliefs in daily life.

While the first group can be seen as the more ceremonial one and, thus, more obligatory in a way, the other contains more explanations that are not bound to particular customs. In my opinion beliefs connected with certain activities are inclined to be preserved due to their complexity and dynamic character, while at the same time they are constantly under threat of being levelled down and modernised in accordance with changes in human interpretation. On the other hand, the beliefs that enjoy a certain degree of “freedom” can be more fragmented, but they are more likely to contain more archaic traits. Penetrating into the people’s ideas about what will happen after death, how this world and the one after death are connected to each other, or what is their notion about the other world in general, helps us gain information about everyday beliefs.

The Votes are a Greek Catholic Baltic Finnic people on the verge of their extinction (about 60 elderly people), the last representatives of which are living in three villages in the Kingissepp district of Leningrad oblast (province). As a nation they exist primarily in the linguistic point of view, as their national identity has been assimilated by the dominating Izhorian and, more particularly, Russian neighbourhood during this century (for more details, see Viikberg 1993). Collecting and studying samples of the Votian language and folklore was a part of the life work of the greatest researcher of the Votian language of the present century, Paul Ariste, an academician and professor of Tartu University. The resulting recordings and literations have been documented in 22 manuscript files titled *Ethnology of Votes (Vadja etnoloogia)* in the Estonian Folklore Archives, as well as in several articles and monographs.

This essay does not focus so much on Votian burial traditions, which have been richly documented and published in Estonian by Paul Ariste in his work *The Vote from Cradle to Grave* (*Vadjalane kätkest kalmuni*) (1974: 151–168). It will rather describe the signs by which the other world has manifested to the Voties in their everyday life, and their relations with the other world, as well as their ideas about life after death. Accordingly, the essay will focus on beliefs rather than customs.

The entire body of information on the Votes is made more complicated by the fact that diachronically, the reports date mainly from this century; in most cases they have been taken from Paul Ariste's manuscript collections, and the number of informants and the territorial coverage is fairly limited. Consequently, the used material does not show much variation. Therefore we cannot always be sure whether a report represents a widespread belief or an individual opinion or conviction. As occasionally the material is quite scanty, the study attempts to be as exhaustive as possible.

## OMENS

While approaching the topic in question from the side of “life”, our primary object of interest will be the omens. It seems that the Votes have been very willing to observe anything that might have served as a death omen in their everyday life. The majority of these signs have also been known among other neighbouring peoples. Paul Ariste has documented a fair number of cases where the foreteller of death has been a bird or some other natural object. An instance of death in the neighbourhood can be foretold by a raven's croaking, a bird flying on the window or into the house, a death tick ticking on the wall, a dog's howling (with its head down), in rare cases also the cackling of a hen. The number of years one expected to live was counted by the cuckoo's calls. The recordings made by Alma Haavamäe of Grigoriy Kuzmin at a dialectological seminar in the University of Helsinki in 1932 (containing also material that cannot be found in the material of Paul Ariste, Haavamäe 1934) add another death omen – a mouse gnawing holes into a person's clothes.

Other omens include noises in house at nights, itching of the nose, stalks of straw crossed in a peculiar way during threshing the grain, an incinerated splinter curving towards a person sitting nearby – that is why everybody tried to avoid sitting by the burning splinter. In spring one could foretell poor crops and also death from withered tops of pine-trees in the forests; one's fortune could be told by throwing a special whisk over one's shoulder on the roof of sauna after bathing on Midsummer's Eve. Thus people used to be (at least,

in those times) very pedantic with these omens. Even at childbirth people tried to foretell by looking out, what kind of death the baby would die (if the day was rainy it would drown, when they saw a rope, it would be hanged, if the weather was fine, it would die properly).



*Photo 1 (above). The chapel of Pihlaala village back in 1942. The private photo collection of Paul Ariste.*



*Photo 2 (right). The same in 1998. Photo by Madis Arukask.*

Sleep, being closely related to death was also observed. Dreaming of a dead person, a priest, or a gift given by a dead person predicted the dreamer's death. At the same time, dreaming of a dead person could also signify rain, bad weather, or, on the contrary, the end of bad weather and setting in of warm weather. Other significant dreams have been fire, seeing the construction of a new farmhouse, seeing a growing tree wither. Dreaming of meat was not a sign of

good death. When one dreamt of a lost or broken ring, one could expect to become a widow or widower. The symbolic language is the most interesting feature in the interpretation of dreams. There is a remarkable story of dreaming of a dead old man coming to propose; the topic of marriage proposals is central in communicating with the other world, it occurs in other genres as well, in runo-songs, for example. An aching tooth falling off in sleep portended the death of a close relative; when there was no pain, a distant relative would die. Among such reports one can find both widespread beliefs and statements made according to personal observations, thus belonging to the type of folklore which cannot really be adorned with epithets like traditional or general.

The death of a sick person could be seen from his or her eyes: when his/her eyes were blurred and only the whites showed, he or she would soon die. When the sick person fell asleep with one or both eyes half open, he or she was also about to pass away. Another sign of imminent death was when the sick person, after a long time, suddenly expressed a wish to have something to eat or drink or to go outside.

Omens were also observed during funerals. The sex of the next person to die could be foretold by the leg with which the horse started to move. If it was the left one, the next person to pass away was a woman. This reflects the symbolic of left and right sides which divides the world between two sexes and between good and evil: while clothing a dead body, it was always the left shoe that was put on first, because the left foot was the dead man's foot; with a living man they were careful never to do so. How soon the next person would die was foretold according to the condition of the body in the coffin: if it was stiff, there was no fear of anybody dying too soon. Returning from the graveyard, they made a good speed; if a sleigh or horse-cart toppled over, another death was predicted to follow soon. The sand that fell into the open grave under someone's feet during the burial was also interpreted as him or her being the next person to pass away, which, in addition to being symbolic, manifests a more direct link between this world and the other.

## FROM SYMBOLS TO THE MORE DEFINITE

The previous discussion concerned omens – i. e. symbolic interpretation of certain signs. This is all it will be even if believers have tested the validity of the omens' and sincerely believe in it. Yet, analyzing the case mentioned previously, where approaching death was determined by sand dropping to grave from under the feet of the person standing near the grave, we can talk about more definite physical connection with the other world.

A number of beliefs seem to distinguish the two realities. The stick used to measure the dead for coffin or digging the grave was put into the grave or left on it, straws the deceased had used to sleep on could be thrown into the grave, too. Similarly it was considered inappropriate to lie down in a coffin (either for taking its measure or just for fun) for this would have resulted in the person's death. The funeral-sand that had already been consecrated by a priest could not be taken home, one had to take it directly to the burial place. On the whole, talking about the dead was not recommended – the speaker would soon die himself. There is another belief that reveals the limited nature of the relations regarding death, i.e. coming across a funeral procession one could only follow it with the eyes, otherwise the same fate would have happened to that person as well. The concept of two realities is also supported by a custom not to take anything along from cemeteries, even the berries growing there belonged either to the dead or to the "God's birds".

At home, the places that the dead body had touched were washed with soap and a rag, the latter thrown into fire or water (*sic!*) after that. Tubs where the deceased was washed were broken and thrown away as well. One could burn the clothes that had been in direct contact with the corpse although there is evidence of different behavior (the clothes were washed and used again). On one occasion the clothes of the dead mother were buried separately at home; this could be thought of as an instant of giving the dead person something for the other world (cf. below). To prevent the hands of the person who had washed the corpse from aching she was given a piece of clothing (e.g. a scarf, etc.) which symbolically neutralized the previous contact with the other world. When the dead body was carried out of the house a nail was hammered in the threshold as a magical metal object or simply as a sign to prevent the appear-



Photo 3 (left). Interior view of Pihlaala's chapel in 1942. The private photo collection of Paul Ariste.

Photo 4 (right). The same in 1998. Photo by Madis Arukask.



ance of the deceased person in any dangerous form. The straw on which the dead body had been lying was burnt on a field where people jumped over the fire singing *fear (go) that way; love (come) this way* – another example of how bonds with the other side could be broken.

At the same time, it was worthwhile to manipulate the physical body of the deceased for selfish reasons (just as it is worthwhile to walk the paths of the dead in fairy-tales for selfish reasons). Anyone who had a ganglion on the arm or leg had to touch the same spot on a dead body, after which he or she could hope to recover. Anyone who feared the dead had to touch the feet of the dead body with his/her hand to get rid of the fear. While trying to break the habit of drinking, a helpful method was said to be putting a coin which had been kept in the mouth of a dead person into the water, and then giving the water to the drunkard to drink without his being aware of – although in the mentioned case the trick had no effect. Very widely known was the application of water used for washing the body, which was usually thrown away after the act (i.e. it was not used again) for the purposes of magic. Before taking a closer look at the other world, I would like to add a few words about the concept of soul.

## THE CONCEPT OF SOUL

Regardless of their Orthodox environment, the beliefs of the Votes include some remnants of the pre-Christian concept of soul. There are only a few reports from Votes about where the human soul is or what it is like, and these reports do not differ significantly from those of their neighbours.

The *Freiseele*-idea (cf. Paulson 1997: 127 ff.) is connected with a cluster of beliefs that forbade the killing of spiders and frogs. Such an act would result in the death of one's mother (in the case of a frog, one's father). The roots of this belief go back to the idea of the plurality of souls in a human body, whereas the *Freiseele* could come out of the body and take the form of an animal or a bird. Today the idea of *Freiseele* has without doubt ceased to exist as an active belief, but has rather been preserved as a kind of allegorical rudiment. Similarly, one must never kill a ladybird (called the Lord's cow), which is only explained with reference to the divine nature in the name of the insect.

According to a single report, the croaking of a raven is not merely a sign of getting news of someone's death (as was shown above), but represents actually the speech of the deceased. In this case, it would be the soul of the dead speaking from the other world, a concept which comes close to the shaman conceptions. A bird as a messenger from the other world is present in songs as well as narratives.

In death omens the idea of *Körperseele* is also common (cf. Paulson 1997: 138 ff.). Well known are the so-called *elo-tiiri* and *elo-iiri*, whose movements under skin, especially their moving towards the eyes and making the lashes quiver is a sign of death.

The belief according to which lice crawl out from the skin after death (or before any kind of hard times) is very popular and several informants claim actually to have seen it. The rational explanation for it is that after death lice abandon the body of their former host. However, the explanation that goes back to the idea of *Körperseele* is also possible.

An ambiguous intermediate stage between dualistic and Christian conceptions of soul is the belief according to which the soul (which

one of them?) is identified with the heart, and upon dying the soul leaves the body, while the heart goes to heaven. Animals have no soul. A recollection of blood as the carrier of something is conveyed by one or two reports saying that if blood *palõhtub*, the human being will die, and that it is blood that causes dreams in men.

## SOUL DIRECTLY AFTER DEATH

According to the general belief the soul of the deceased person remained at home for three more days after the death. Canonically this can be explained with the fact that the Resurrection of Christ took place on the third day after his death (Kuzmenko 1996: 225), according to the apocryphal tradition on the third day he went to the Hell to put Satan in chains and redeem the patriarchs. For three days the deceased was not talked or gossiped about because during this time he could hear everything. During that time nothing was lent to others for this would have disturbed the dead person. During the three days people spoke in a low voice and did not work much.



*Photo 5. Maria Boranova from Mati village in Chair of Finno-Ugric Languages of Tartu's University. The private photo collection of Paul Ariste.*

## THE OTHER WORLD

The idea of a life after death among Votes is largely based on pre-Christian and apocryphal traditions. Christianity in Orthodox villages is characterized by a relatively active religious life on the one hand and by an attitude that does not care much for and even levels down dogmatic nuances on the other hand, up to even practicing magic for personal benefit. Popular religion makes use of syncretism, in this case the mixture of what the church defines as “magical” or “religious” elements, although the folk users do not necessarily see a difference between these



two (Stark 1996:146). Further research should be conducted on the attitude of Votes and other small non-Russian Orthodox nations towards the canon: this would be of great help in interpreting many aspects of the popular religion. The fact that religion is the concern of heart rather than that of mind (which is probably the most crucial difference with Protestantism) expresses itself first of all in a certain need for mysticism and is not very particular about the sources where it gets food for imagination.

It seems that in questions about what will happen after death the popular mind has avoided the Christian dualism; this is evident when people speak about *the other world* rather than Paradise or Hell. Perhaps this serves to neutralize the psychological tension created by such an important question or give the impression that everything will continue there in the same way it used to here. So blood enemies forgave each other on the death-bed so they would not have to quarrel in the other world. A copper coin was thrown in the grave to help the dead person redeem a better place in the other world. For the same purpose, a bottle of vodka could be used. Putting bread, a pair of undergarments, money, etc. to coffin was not a practice of the official Orthodox doctrine (see Kuzmenko 1996: 192). The idea of this life continuing in the other world is also conveyed by the belief that if, after the death of the farmer or his wife, a horse or a cow died on the farm, it meant that the deceased took his/her share with him/her to the other world (usually an egg was put in the armpit of the body so that he/she would symbolically have "his/her share"). Also, the mother whose children had died was not supposed to eat strawberries before *Päädra* (St. Peter's day; June 29th/July 12th), because otherwise the children would not be given strawberries in the other world. The first strawberry was to be put on a stone, then the child will have it on the other side. Also significant is the report according to which the clothes of the deceased were buried separately at home after the funeral. According to similar interpretations that are not in conformity with the Christian canon, life after death is simply the continuation of worldly life with no major differences.

## HEAVEN AND HELL

Naturally, the Christian concept of heaven and hell was not totally unknown. It has been noted that today a person cannot ascend to heaven any more because it is already full. It is not entirely clear whether this assumption is based on the interpretation of the Scriptural passage about the 144 000 who will be redeemed (Revelation 14, 1–5) or not. It has also been suggested that heaven is now filled with dissenters, though at the same time dissenters are regarded negatively.

There is no detailed or substantial description of either heaven or hell in the Bible as emphasis is primarily laid on a man's spiritual rebirth after resurrection, and heaven and hell are referred to allegorically only. So it is said in the First Letter of John: "Beloved, we are God's children now; it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is." (1 Jn 3,2). Folk interpretation is not so abstract. The continuation of body in Christian afterlife is apparent from the custom to put a handkerchief in the left hand of the dead, so that he can make the cross sign with the right hand at his arrival.

According to the most mythologised Christian ideology, the concept of Paradise falls into three categories (MNM II: 364):

1. Paradise as garden
2. Paradise as town
3. Paradise as heaven

According to the scanty Votian materials, the idea of paradise as a garden is dominant. Trees grow in heaven. Descriptions of heaven have also been obtained through dreams: there are flower-beds, paths covered with sand.

Heaven was believed to have 40 gates. After death, the soul had to walk from gate to gate for six weeks and give away one sin at every gate, returning home to sleep every now and then. After that the soul was to be granted a place in heaven. Here the symbolic use of the number 40 can be observed, a recurrent number in both the Old and New Testament. As Jesus was taken to heaven on the 40th day after resurrection then according to the Orthodox canon the

Photo 6. Olga Ivanova from Mati village in 1942. The private photo collection of Paul Ariste.



soul's arrival to God is celebrated on the 40th day after the person's death (cf. Kuzmenko 1996: 226).

According to folk belief, the souls of children and soldiers who had died for the nation's sins went straight to heaven. Old maids did not go to heaven because they had not felt the pains of Virgin Mary. The same concept is recognizable in a more pessimistic version where the sinful deceased (or his/her soul) is driven past the gates of heaven but is not let in. It was also believed that the best time to die was *Enipäiv* (Easter) when souls went to heaven automatically. The Passion Week, on the other hand, was a bad time to die.

The journey to heaven in folk belief was apocryphally colorful: before getting to heaven one had to go through the mouth of a serpent – first priests, then the rich, the poor, beggars. The motif of the journey after death was also reflected in customs, namely when the body was put in the coffin its hands were placed from the chest to the sides, so that getting up he could start walking at once. After death the departed (one's soul) had to climb high mountains and then show God his nails. The latter was explained with the belief that in the other world God asked for your nails and if you had thrown them away, you had to come back to look for them. That is why all nails ever cut had to be kept and carried along – then there is no need to come back from the other side to look for them. This probably refers to nails as one of the substances of the soul. The motif of keeping the nails is known in other mythologies as well (e.g. in the Scandinavian end of the world, the ship Naglfar, made of human nails, sails on the sea – see the Younger Edda, *Gylfaginning* LI – although this is made of the nails of the dead with uncut nails).

A letter from Archbishop Vassiliy of Novgorod to Bishop Feodor of Tver (14th century; MNM II: 364) describes how seafarers from

Novgorod were driven by wind to high mountains behind which was the Paradise; they saw amazing lights and heard happy voices, and the firmament was supported on these mountains. The mountains in front of Paradise bear a symbolic meaning in Votian tradition of illustrating the difficulties of the way there.

On the other hand, it is easy to go to hell: no mountains to climb and no other obstacles in the way. The prevalent idea in beliefs concerning hell is the traditional fire symbolism that can be found in the Scriptures (especially New Testament), although the Bible concentrates upon hell as a symbol rather than presenting detailed pictures of the sufferings that the folk belief with its love for mysticism craves.

In hell the souls are boiled in a kettle of tar, while another sinner is fueling the fire. A parallel report says that it is priests who throw logs into the fire, while those who have committed fewer sins supply the priests with firewood. Some kind of pictorial source has given rise to an idea of hell in the form of a tower. It is clear that in Orthodox tradition people's fantasy drew the ideas of hell, the Judgement Day or Christ's descent to the nether world primarily from icons.

Liars, drunkards, those who had not attended communion, sinners, those who had committed suicide, were all destined to hell. When a thunder was heard during funerals, they said that *Ilja Prorok* (Prophet Elijah) was opening the gates (of heaven), but also that God would not admit the person they were burying to heaven.

## **THE BODY IN THE GRAVE**

An opposite concept to the journey to the other world of heaven and/or hell was a parallel idea of the deceased sleeping an eternal sleep. The Votian tradition does not say much about the Judgement Day; it may occur only due to the emphasis in Paul Ariste's questions. In any case, the death-sleep was made as comfortable as possible. The clothes that were sewn for the corpse had no knots, so that these would not disturb the body. While sewing, the thread was never cut, but torn with hands, for it was believed that cut thread-ends would make the deceased uncomfortable. A sewing-

machine was never used, and the stitches were carefully made wide apart from each other. No needle or pin was put into coffin. Also, one was not allowed to weep by the dead so that the tears would fall on the body – it would distract the eternal sleep of the deceased. While in most cases a copper (not silver) coin was put in the coffin for buying a place in the other world, according to one report the five-kopeck pieces that were put on the eyes of the deceased were later put into the coffin for buying the earth.

## CONCLUSION

The whole body of Votian material reveals temporal and spatial limitation of collecting, as well as the inevitably small number of correspondents, which is not helpful in trying to put together a true picture against the broad historical background. In this century the Votian people were on the verge of extinction and the contribution of some exceptionally good informants (Oudekki Figurova, Maria Boranova, Olga Ivanova, etc.) does not compensate for or come anywhere close to the glory that was still remembered by the Votes as late as at the end of the 18th century, according to Fyodor Tumanskiy's manuscript (see Öpik 1970: 54). According to the ex-



*Photo 7, 8. Oudekki Figurova from Rajo village with her crows in 1966. Photo by Tõnu Seilenthal.*



isting material, for the most part the Votes' beliefs correspond to those of their neighbours.

As the background of these sources is in some cases not established, we cannot be certain in the religious continuity of some nuance or other. A single report always entails the possibility of being an individual improvisation or a mere coincidence.

The Votes' ideas about soul, death and life after death fit in the apocryphal rustic Christian intermediate space which is typical to a small Orthodox nation that has long been illiterate. It is also characteristic to find remnants of pre-Christian beliefs (such as the ideas concerning soul, ordinary life continued in the other world) coexisting and combined with Christian mystification (mainly ideas about heaven and hell), without clashing ideologically.

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