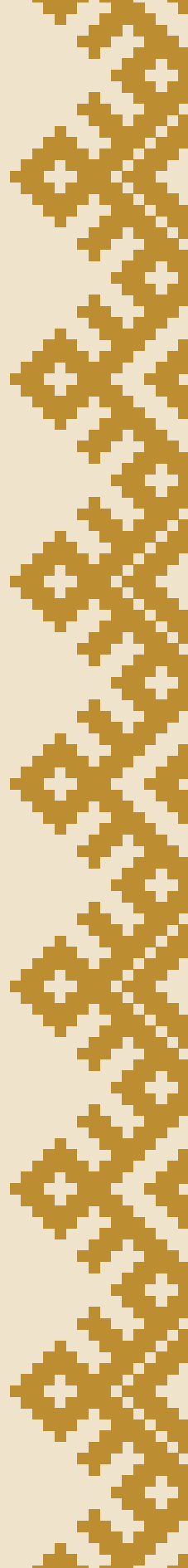




# Folklore

Electronic Journal of Folklore 96





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Estonian Institute of Folklore



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## Agency of the Dead

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# Introduction

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This special issue is an outcome of the international interdisciplinary conference organised by the ERC project *The Roles of the Agency of the Dead in the Lives of Individuals in Contemporary Society* (DEAGENCY, No. 101095729; 2023–2028), the aim of which is to gain a comprehensive understanding of the roles of the dead in the lives of individuals in contemporary Western society, with a particular focus on post-socialist countries. Rather than viewing the dead as mere expressions of “folk belief”, or symbols and metaphors for larger cultural and social problems and changes, as tends to be the case in scholarly approaches to “ghosts” and “hauntings”, this project will view the dead as being actively involved in the intricate relationships between individuals and larger social and cultural processes. It will focus on how individuals are affected by the dead (and vice versa): in what way they affect their thoughts, values and behaviour; how they are involved in their social relations with others; and what impact their effect may have on an individual in a wider social, cultural and political context.

The first of four planned conferences, entitled *The Agency of the Dead in the Lives of Individuals: Experience and Conceptualization*, organised by DEAGENCY in Ljubljana in August 2024, sparked much interest among scholars of a variety of disciplines – folkloristics, anthropology, thanatology, media and information sciences, sociology, social work, etc. In fact, there were more applicants than we were able to accommodate in the three days of the conference. This seems to prove that despite a rather common popular discourse proclaiming death a taboo in contemporary society – which has already been criticised by various scholars but still persists – there is indeed a widespread scholarly interest in death and the dead in our society today and that there is an urgent need for these to be properly studied. Moreover, this also seems to prove that the dead do indeed play a significant role, even if our current cultural expectations do

not encourage us to keep them in our lives. In contrast to pre-modern European societies, and many contemporary non-Western societies, where the dead were or are considered members of the community and were or are significantly involved in people's everyday lives, the dominant Western ontology today does not provide a framework for communication and exchange between the living and the dead. We are therefore expected to let the dead go and form new attachments, the sooner the better.

Yet, to a degree counter to this generally accepted societal dismissal, scholarship has, especially since the 1990s, paid increasing attention to the role that the dead continue to play in society. Sociology, history and anthropology have recognised that ghosts play an important role in highlighting social problems and unresolved and suppressed social, particularly violent, pasts. Folkloristics has recognised that the dead play an important role in upholding cultural norms and values. Bereavement studies have shown that continuing bonds with the dead are helpful for some bereaved people, and have recognised their therapeutic value after the loss of a significant other. Each from their own perspectives, these disciplines have shed light on the roles fulfilled by the dead in contemporary society, yet their findings remain, to a large degree, compartmentalised, confined to their own scholarly traditions, with little mutual interaction or cooperation. The valuable insights that these disciplines have contributed to the understanding of the roles of the dead in contemporary society therefore remain mostly scattered and incomplete.

The aim of this conference, and all other conferences within the project that will take place in the coming years, is precisely to overcome disciplinary boundaries and bridge the gap between the different perspectives, theories, methods and approaches to the study of the dead. We have therefore welcomed studies that looked at the agency of dead bodies, and of the material objects and places associated with the deceased, as well as those that examined the agency of their spiritual counterparts. We have welcomed studies that discussed the agency of the dead in preserving memory or triggering emotions, but also those that focused on the agency of the dead actively and intentionally interfering with and affecting the lives of the living. We have welcomed studies that look at the dead discussed in narratives and emerging in social practices as well as in the media, popular culture and the digital world. We have welcomed studies that look at the agency of the dead in the lives of individuals, but also those that look at their roles in communities and global society. By bringing together scholars from a variety of fields and disciplinary backgrounds, applying a variety of perspectives, theories, methods and approaches to the study of the dead and their agency, and basing their research on a wide range of data, we hope to shed light on the broader roles that the dead play in our lives today.

Unfortunately, due to the large number of papers submitted as the outcome of the conference, in the end we were forced to split them between two journals: In addition to the special issue before you, half of the submitted articles will be



published in an upcoming special issue of the journal *Anthropological Notebooks* 31/2, 2025 (see: <https://anthropological-notebooks.zrc-sazu.si/Notebooks> ).

Although the main focus of the first DEAGENCY conference was *experience* and *conceptualisation* – whereas the forthcoming conferences will focus on the *contexts* and *triggers* of experience, *ways of communicating* with the dead, and, more generally, the *roles of the dead* – the foci and geographical locations of the individual contributions vary considerably in this issue as well. Kaarina Koski’s article, which presents different theoretical approaches and conceptualisations of “agency”, offers a thorough discussion of the various forms of agency of the dead in the everyday life of 21st-century Finnish people. Based on her fieldwork among the Hungarian minority in Romania, Éva Pócs gives an overview of diverse forms of communication between the living and the dead within the framework of vernacular Christianity. Christianity, with its doctrine of Purgatory, is also the framework for Vito Carrassi’s paper, in which he focuses on two practices aimed at the souls and Purgatory in southern Italy and shows how an old practice can be revitalized and reassessed. Contributions by Ágnes Hesz and Ikhlās Abdul Hadi focus on the dead in the lives of individuals but consider them within broader religious contexts and frameworks of interpretations. Focusing on the views and conceptualisation of the dead of a particular individual living in a rural Hungarian community, Ágnes Hesz aims at addressing broader questions regarding the formation of individual views and the role of the dead in contemporary society. Ikhlās Abdul Hadi, on the other hand, discusses the experience of a Malay Muslim woman, haunted by the spirit of a woman who died in childbirth, within the framework of Malay rituals and broader traditional vernacular notions about spirits. Rather than within traditional vernacular religious frameworks, Tatiana Bužeková’s and Tina Ivnik’s papers studied continued ties between the living and the dead within new spiritual interpretative frameworks. While the former focuses on the communication space between the living and the dead in shamanic circles in Slovakia and on the moral dimension manifested through spatiality, the latter examines the ties of spiritual people in Bosnia with the dead in dreams, putting them in relation with their ideas about afterlife. Continuing bonds with the dead are also in the centre of Simona Kuntarič Zupanc’s paper, except that she focuses on plants acting as “living bridges” between the living and the dead. While my own paper presented at the conference in which I discussed uncanny experiences of a Muslim woman and their conceptualisation (“Uncanny Experience and its Meaning-Making as Moral Experience”) appeared in the journal *Numen, International Review for History of Religions* (Mencej 2025), this special issue concludes with a paper in which I discuss the transformation of the dead as moral agents in Muslim oral narratives into vehicles of the ethnonationalist agenda when appropriated by the media.

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**Mirjam Mencej** is Professor of Folkloristics at the Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology of the Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia. Her main fields of research are belief narratives, vernacular religion, the dead and witchcraft. She is a principal investigator of the ERC Adv. Grant project *The roles of the agency of the dead in the lives of individuals in contemporary society* (DEAGENCY, No. 101095729). She has published seven books (one co-authored), the most recent being *Styrian Witches in European Perspective. Ethnographic Fieldwork* (London: Palgrave Macmillan / Springer 2017). She has also published more than 100 scientific articles and (co-)edited three books and four special issues. She has been President of the *International Society for Folk Narrative Research* (ISFNR) since 2024.

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# The Dead Amongst the Living: Agency, Intention, and Power

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**Abstract:** The dead are viewed as having agency in this world when they make a difference to our lives. This article explores the various forms of agency that the dead are felt to have. Also, it looks at the power relations between the living and the dead. The research is based on archived narratives and internet discussions produced in Finland in the 21st century. The dead can be felt to have intentional agency that either derives from the past when they were alive, or emerges from a spiritual realm. But usually, their agency is viewed as non-intentional. As such, it is only represented by their memory or material objects in relation to the living in actor-networks. The representations can also serve the intentions of the bereaved. After all, it is the living who narrate the story of the dead, selecting what to include in it. Thus, there are even stories about deceased people and haunting that are next to fiction. But in everyday life, close relatives may have had such a formative role in one's identity that one cannot control their, or even one's own, story. The dead can have agency without intentions.

**Keywords:** actor-networks, agency, dead, haunting, intentionality, memory

The dead have an ambiguous role in the communities of the living. Even though they are absent, they may have an impact and their presence can be felt via their memory or legacy – or even in experiences of encounters with them. In this article, I am using the concept of agency to analyse the impact and position of the dead in contemporary Western societies. It has recently been suggested in death studies that in modernity, the dead were being detached from the society of the living, but since the late 20th century, their presence has become more visible in both private practices and public space (see, for example, Howarth

2007; Maddrell 2013; Walter 2019). My analysis is connected to this new integration of the dead in the lives of the living.

The status of the dead and the possibility of their having agency in the lives of the living varies culturally and historically, and the current changes are part of a longer chain of developments. The dead used to have an influential role earlier in history. Researchers have viewed medieval and other traditional communities as twin societies, which consist of both their dead and living members. In such societies, the dead have been depicted as being active members of society who take part in a reciprocal exchange with their living offspring and who might interfere if not satisfied (see, for example, Geary 1994: 78–79; Pentikäinen 1969: 95–96; Harva 1948: 502–511). In contrast, modernity has been characterised by a growing detachment between the living and the dead. The denial of the deceased ones' capacity and entitlement to active roles in the world of the living was initiated by the Reformation and supported by the Enlightenment and secularisation. Inspired by Sigmund Freud's grief model in *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917), 20th century psychologists standardised the need to break the emotional bond with the dead. The bereaved were thus recommended to let go, move on and invest in new attachments. Failure to do so was considered unhealthy (Howarth 2007: 20–30; Field 2006; Maddrell 2013: 506; Walter 2019: 392). It has been stated that in the 20th century, the sequestration of the dead has been all-encompassing: the bodies were handled professionally and kept out of sight, buried outside cities; communication between the living and the dead being deemed both psychologically unhealthy and theologically impossible. However, in the private sphere, and especially outside the Protestant world, there have been more connections and communications with the dead. By the end of the 20th century, researchers started to notice a change and have a more nuanced view of the position of the dead in Western societies (Walter 2019: 391–393).

It was first the study of vernacular practices that pointed to an increased presence of the dead. From the 1990s onwards, bereavement researchers started recognising that personal relationships often continue after death and that these can be healthy and adaptive (see, for example, Silverman & Klass 1996; Howarth 2000; Valentine 2008; Koski 2016a). The late 20th and early 21st centuries have also witnessed a growing informalisation and increasing freedom to express relations with the dead, something which is also occurring in the public sphere. One notices, for example, an increasing number of vernacular memorials for the deceased both in homes and in public spaces in Europe and the United States. While this phenomenon had existed in earlier times, and especially in Catholic and Orthodox parts of Europe, a wider scholarly interest towards such practices sparked around the 1990s. Instead of marking an absence, the memorials, as well as graveyards, came to be interpreted as a way of integrating the deceased into the society of the living. (Doss 2008: 5–11; Margry & Sánchez-Carretero 2011: 1–4; Maddrell 2013: 507–511; Santino

2004). Another public domain in which the commemoration of and bonding with the dead can be seen as taking place is social media, including online games (Brubaker & Hayes & Dourish 2013; Haverinen 2014; Bassett 2015). The proximity between the living and the dead in recent years also manifests itself in the imagery concerning the whereabouts of the dead. Instead of thinking that the dead are in Heaven and stay there, it has now become more common to imagine them living on the outskirts of everyday reality, visiting the living, or to explain that the dead live in the hearts of the bereaved (Day 2012; Walter 2016; Koski 2020). This increased presence of the dead in our world has inspired scholars to suggest that unlike the past, when death was tabooed and sequestered, we are now living in an era of the “pervasive dead” (Walter 2019).

In this article, I am exploring the agency of the dead in the everyday life of the living: how and in which circumstances the agency of the dead manifests itself, and how it can be approached and defined in theoretical terms. I will discuss the concept of agency and especially the question of intentionality within it. To handle the various forms of intentionality in relation to the agency of the dead, I will combine theories which have different approaches to the intentionality of agency. Furthermore, I will look at the interdependency and power relations between the living and the dead: Who is it that exerts power in the interaction? Do the deeds and intentions of influential deceased relatives still continue to shape our lives after their death? Or is it we, the living, who redefine their image and reputation once they are gone? I will first describe the cultural context and my research material, then discuss the theoretical frames for agency, and last, apply them to experiences of the bereaved.

## THE CULTURAL CONTEXT AND RESEARCH MATERIALS

My analysis concerns the situation in 21st century Finland. In recent international surveys, Finns were shown to be near the European average in their beliefs in life after death (Ketola et al. 2017: 46; Luijkx et al. 2017: 259). Similarly, in the World Values Survey maps, while being part of Protestant Europe, Finns' values are close to Catholic Europe and English-speaking countries, as well (WVS 2020; Inglehart & Welzel 2005). Compared to its Nordic neighbours, Finland is more conservative when it comes to death: the Lutheran church still holds a monopoly in death culture, and the cremation rate is much lower than, for example, in Sweden. Finland is culturally and geographically situated between East and West, and modernisation reached the country relatively late. Consequently, traditional rural death culture with the dead being prepared at home prevailed in Finland longer than in most other Protestant countries. Finland was strongly affected by the Second World War, resulting in a restrained form of grieving, which is typical of hard times. Nevertheless, Finnish death scholars estimate that the era of sequestration and death denial only really

prevailed in Finland in the 1960s and 1970s, after which the visibility of death started to increase again (Butters 2017; Haverinen & Pajari 2019: 313, 324–327).

In 2025, 62% of Finns are members of the Lutheran church (evl.fi 2025). Lutheranism is present in societal values, but with regard to their belief in God or an afterlife, Finns often declare they do not follow the doctrine of the Church. Secularisation has rapidly increased in Finland during the last decades, and belief in an afterlife has also been constantly declining. In the year 2000, 57% of Finns believed in an afterlife (compared to 46% of Swedes, 38% of Danes and even 78% of Icelanders). According to the latest survey that handled thoroughly the question of afterlife (2015), 39% of Finns think that death represents the end of all life, while 49% find it possible that something follows death, even though they are not sure what that might be. 33% think that the living might sense a connection with the dead, but the general feeling about an afterlife is uncertainty: 71% declare that nobody can know what happens after death (Haraldsson 2006; Ketola et al 2017: 42–48). Belief in an afterlife, however, is not necessary in the interaction between the living and the dead. As the religion sociologist Abby Day suggests, relationality – the tendency to build one's life and identity together with and in relation to other people – makes the bereaved continue the bond with their deceased loved ones irrespective of their views about an afterlife (Day 2012).

A long-standing influence of the Lutheran doctrine in Finland relates to the fact that the Church denies the possibility that the dead could be in contact with the living. Consequently, experiences of mutual interaction with the dead are not encouraged in Christian circles. In Finland, contacts with the dead are thus often interpreted with the help of vernacular family traditions (Alasuutari 2017). This has been invigorated by esoteric spirituality, which left an imprint on local death culture in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Harmainen 2014; Kaartinen & Leskelä-Kärki 2020: 64–65). Public discourse, meanwhile, favours a more materialistic world view. In everyday life, relations with the family dead tend to be socially constructed around memory and legacy, and experiences of contacts that are initiated by the dead are exceptional and seldom discussed publicly. Anonymously written experience narratives nonetheless reveal much more about the phenomenon.

The dead are viewed as having agency in this world when they make a difference in our lives. The agency of the dead is manifested in various ways for different people and in different contexts, and narratives and descriptions about the issue are formed differently in different discourses. Therefore, I have used a variety of narrative texts as research material: archived texts, social media, and traditional media. The insights in this paper draw from a wider array of materials, but its present form is formulated by help of the following textual corpuses, citations of which will also be presented in the analysis.

First, I have used an archived collection of written reminiscence narratives entitled “Death, Loss, and Memory” dating from 2014 (see Koski 2016a).



Responding to a request by the archives of the Finnish Literature Society (*Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura*), 101 participants, most of them women, sent in their contributions, either in handwriting or via a digital form. The resulting collection covers 550 archived pages (reference K1–550).<sup>1</sup> Not every participant indicated their age, but several writers had been born in the 1920s, and the majority were from the 1930s or 1940s, while only 10 writers were born in the 1970s or later. The writers were free to choose how to approach the topic, but for inspiration, the call included questions, for example, about the care for the dying, the presence and memory of the deceased and the possibility of meeting the dead. The contents of the resulting reminiscence narratives range from descriptions of funerary customs to critical remarks about the health-care system, to emotional narratives about personal loss, and to dreams about an afterlife. Therefore, not all of the texts were about the agency of the dead. Many of the writers have built chronological life stories, which may describe the impact of the deceased in their lives, the ways in which a presence of their dead loved ones is actively produced, or negotiations about the memory of the deceased in their family. Others focused on some particular person and the relationship before and after death. Furthermore, some texts described special moments when the memory or even the deceased person themselves were felt to be present.

Second, I used online discussions. They represent interactional discourse, in which the expressed ideas get collectively evaluated, and they involve younger participants than the archived materials.<sup>2</sup> Online forums have been sites where participants can discuss various, even sensitive issues anonymously. I have used discussion from the oldest and most well-known discussion forum in Finland, Suomi24. For example, grief and extraordinary experiences related to bereavement have been discussed there anonymously in numerous threads which are openly available. In the 2020s, such browser-based forums with asynchronous discussions have been superseded by social media applications, in which people nowadays spend more time. Nevertheless, they are still used for discussion and for getting peer insight on intriguing questions. While anonymity increases the risk of getting a rude response, empathy is on offer as well, and users find their participation meaningful. (Harju 2018: 61–62; Lehti et al. 2020: 10–11; Ylisiurua 2024: 63–65, 68–71). Here, I have used a discussion in which a freshly bereaved person contemplates the question of an afterlife and the possibility of contact with the deceased. They are responded to by expressing condolences, giving advice and sharing more or less similar personal experiences. I have analysed the discussion elsewhere.<sup>3</sup> For the purpose of this paper, I use stories shared in the discussions to illustrate how the agency of the dead is described by the bereaved. The academic use of anonymous posts that appear on these forums is viewed as being ethically appropriate. Popular discussion forums have been approached in Finnish academic research as the collective voice of everyday people, and the majority of the Suomi24 content

has been archived in the Language Bank of Finland for research purposes (Lehti et al. 2020: 11–12; Ylisiurua 2024: 101–103).

As another form of internet discussion, I use an older thread (Ilta-Sanomat 2010) in the website of an afternoon newspaper, inviting people to tell ghost stories (see Koski 2016b). The stories range from strange sounds to personal encounters with deceased people, either one's own relatives or others. Ghost stories illustrate purposeful narrative representations of the actively returning dead.

The third form of research material is provided by the Finnish media. I will present the case of a late Finnish athlete, whose memory and legacy have been publicly discussed and negotiated in the media. The media materials show that the agency and memory of the deceased are not only private matters but widely discussed in public as well.

In the archived and online narratives, the agency of the dead in personal life is experienced for the most part as a positive phenomenon. People feel they receive support or help from the dead or simply see them as representing an important part of their social reality. However, for some, the dead or their impact after death is felt to be a burden. Ghost stories, in turn, show an unwanted and frightening contact. Also in personal life, the negative impact of the deceased is sometimes conceptualised in the shape of “hauntings” either in a concrete or metaphorical sense (Lincoln & Lincoln 2015).

I analyse the texts along the lines of narrative positioning. Narratives function as meaning-making with respect to special events, one's own life and the life of the deceased person. According to the Positioning Theory, people produce and define themselves and others as social beings. In narratives, they are positioned in relation to one another (Bamberg 1997: 336–337). Reminiscing over the dead, the living are the ones who narrate the story from their own point of view. The relationships can be portrayed as harmonious, aiming at keeping up the memory of the deceased. Sometimes, however, there are power struggles. The living builds a selective narrative which may reduce the life and personality of the dead relative. But sometimes the narrative can portray the dead in a controlling position, while the living submits to the conditions set by the dead.

## AGENCY

In the humanities and social sciences, agency has been theorised along two lines, the first assuming that an agent necessarily has intentions, while the second considers non-intentional and nonhuman agents as well. The dead can be perceived from both viewpoints, depending on whether they are assumed to exist as sentient beings or not. I will thus make use of both conceptualisations of agency.



In the social sciences, philosophy, and generally in its traditional meaning, agency is the human capability to enact one's will. Achieving one's goals requires both intentions and resources (see, for example, Hewson 2010). In social psychology, agency involves self-regulation: a capacity to plan, manage and evaluate one's actions (Bandura 2018: 130–131). Agency has been frequently connected with free will, resistance and conscious activity, thus also referring to the ability to exercise power (see, for example, Ahearn 2001: 112–117). Agency is not an intrinsic quality of an actor but is always located within a context. It thus emerges in relation with others who may enable or restrain it. It is based on the interdependency of human actors and involves power relations in which one may have a greater position of power over the other (Burkitt 2018: 526–531).

Intentional agency only applies to living people. The other approach is to acknowledge that agency can also be non-intentional. In both materialist and posthuman research, it was already being widely suggested by the end of the 20th century that nonhuman entities, such as natural phenomena and materials, can make a remarkable contribution to our lives without being intentional. The same can apply to nonhuman animals (Latour 2005; Sayes 2014; Müller 2015). The “Actor-Network Theory”, coined within science and technology studies by figures like Bruno Latour, Michel Callon and John Law, highlights that human action always involves interaction with other actors who/which affect each other in networked assemblages. For these scholars, our networks are seen as including, for example, natural phenomena, tools, bacteria, vehicles and machines (Sayes 2014: 136). The impact of an actor can nonetheless be small: indeed, sometimes sheer existence is enough to make an action possible, to permit, suggest, inspire, or to do the opposite: in other words, to hinder or block some action. Agency is thus defined by minimal criteria: an entity has agency if it makes a difference (Latour 2005: 72). Following this approach, we can recognize the agency of the dead in their new role, in which they do not possess intentions of their own. It can be observed that the dead, who are no longer physically present, and their belongings which we have preserved, can make a difference to our lives.

The philosopher Hans Ruin, who has focused on the contribution of the dead in our societies, finds the extension of agency to cover inanimate entities as unsatisfactory and confusing. In his book *Being with the Dead* (2019), he depicts the dead collectively as intentional actors who, nonetheless, belong to the past. Ruin elaborates on the transtemporal interactions that take place between the living and the dead members of the society, suggesting that we, as living people, interact with our history and carry the legacy of our predecessors into the present. The dead are thus seen as providing us with their legacy. We, in turn, do what they cannot do any more: we continue with their legacy, name and image. As Ruin writes, we feel the intentions of the dead in the legacy they pass on to us, for example, in the artefacts they produced. Gradually, however, the

feeling of their intentionality fades away and our own reactions and interpretations take over (Ruin 2019: 100–108). Ruin focuses on cultural continuities and the manifestation of ancestral and family lineages, emphasising the constitutive role of the dead (Ruin 2019: 78, 90). These are, however, not the only aspects of the agency that the dead have.

The Actor Network Theory involves the past as a temporal extension for non-human entities. While it does not acknowledge dead human beings as actors, they can be involved in networks via nonhuman entities which, as themselves, are spatially and temporally flexible gatherings. Therefore, actors that are no longer there can be present in associations, which have not broken down. (Sayes 2014: 140–141). In other words, the dead are represented by material entities – such as photographs or other keepsakes – which are associated with them. The dead as mental representations or spiritual entities were not within the scope of the Actor Network Theory, as it originally focused on the agency of material objects. Indeed, the theorists explicitly stated that entities that are supernatural or entirely symbolic in nature cannot be endowed with non-human agency (Sayes 2014: 136). An ethnographic view of human experience nonetheless defines reality from a broader viewpoint, suggesting that intangible entities can be seen as real in a social reality if they make a difference and people react to them. The anthropology of intangibles explores critically the ways in which humans in different contexts perceive the agency of various entities. Instead of aiming to produce a scientific definition of real entities, these scholars acknowledge that people feel the impact of various intangible entities in their everyday lives. This includes not only spiritual beings but also other intangibles, such as values, economy, or memory. Indeed, for them, even absence can be seen as making a difference and impacting people's lives and thereby having agency (Espírito Santo & Blanes 2014: 11–17).

The agency of the dead is formed in many ways depending on the viewpoint and context. In my analysis, I recognise three main ideas about the existence and impact of the dead in this reality:

- 1) The dead are physically non-existent and do not have thoughts or intentions. They are gone, and only represented in this world by their memory or material objects, the meanings of which depend on the context.
- 2) The dead are seen as intentional human beings who existed in the past and whose intentions are mediated by their legacy.
- 3) The dead exist as sentient and intentional beings in a spiritual realm and can contact the living and make new input.

These three are often combined with each other. It is not always explicated whether a felt presence of a deceased loved one is simply evoked by a memory or if it is interpreted as a real encounter with an intentional being. In particular, the boundary between the first and second viewpoint, culminating in the question of intentionality, is not only blurry in practice but also disputed by theorists.

## THE AGENCY OF REPRESENTATIONS AND OBJECTS

We can define a memory of a dead person as a representation of the deceased, but there are diverse views about its intentionality. Can a memory be regarded as a non-intentional entity, or is it something that channels the intentions of the deceased? Theorists working in the field of agency disagree about the agency of representations.

The anthropologist Alfred Gell handled the question of the agency of representations in his study *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (1998). Here, Gell emphasised that an artwork is a non-intentional entity which does have agency, but is not self-sustaining. Gell's model thus conceptualises the interaction that takes place between the artist, the artwork, the recipient and the object or idea that is represented in the artwork. A central feature in this model is the division that exists between agents and "patients" or receivers: the actor who/which impacts on another is an agent, while the one that is affected is a patient.

If we apply this to the dead, then the dead person is the object that is represented, and the memory can be regarded as the representation, although it is unclear who can be seen as the artist that creates the representation. In the past, when they were still alive, the dead person themselves still served as the artist because they were the ones who created the image and style that lies behind the story of themselves. After death, however, the task is transferred to the bereaved. The bereaved have the roles of both artists and recipients: on one hand, they perform the presence of the dead in their lives, but on the other hand, they are naturally also affected by it.

Another relevant point in Gell's view is that he presents intentional and non-intentional agents in terms of a hierarchical relationship. Intentional agents, such as the artist, are seen as being primary, while non-intentional agents are secondary, because they merely mediate the intention of the primary agent. Gell thus finds intentionality a necessary characteristic of agency but thinks it can be mediated by a variety of entities (Gell 1998: 17, 36–37). When applied to the dead, this would mean that a memory has agency, but it either derives from the dead in the past or mediates the intentions of the bereaved. This is in opposition with the Actor-Network Theory discussed earlier, and despite their disharmony, I find it useful to combine them. While I agree with Gell that the agency of representations can mediate intentions of living or dead people, I think there is also purely non-intentional agency involved. The Actor-Network Theory emphasises the remarkable effects of non-intentional natural phenomena – in which I include death – and suggests that in new contexts, or in new networked assemblages, man-made entities may have new roles that are disconnected from the intentions of their designers (Pickering 1995: 6, 11–12, 22). When death is involved, the memory as a representation of

the deceased also has meanings and effects that were not necessarily intended by anyone.

Indeed, death has no intentions, but it has agency and makes a difference. Death initiates new contexts and assemblages, in which the agency of the representations of the deceased is reassessed. Objects that represent the deceased also have effects that are neither intended by the deceased nor orchestrated by the bereaved. For example, one narrator describes that she started crying when she read the wartime diary of her late brother who died in the Second World War and whom she had not even known properly (K275–282). While writing the diary, the young man hardly intended to make his little sister cry. The diary represents her brother, only not as the person he was while alive, but as a deceased person, who is lost and gone and whose intentions belonged to a life that was cut short. A variety of objects may represent the deceased, and while the objects may mediate the agency of the dead, they do not necessarily involve their intentions. Unless the person, while alive, planned the objects to function as memorial keepsakes after their death, the meaning of the objects changes when they are inherited by the bereaved.

Depending on the context, representations of the dead can have self-sustaining agency or mediate another actor's intentions. Both views about the agency of representations need to be taken into account when we explore the agency of the dead in theoretical terms. Memory can be viewed as a process; a representation constantly emerging with the help of a network of intentional and non-intentional agents. It is nonetheless also an entity that has an agency of its own and makes a difference in the lives of the bereaved.

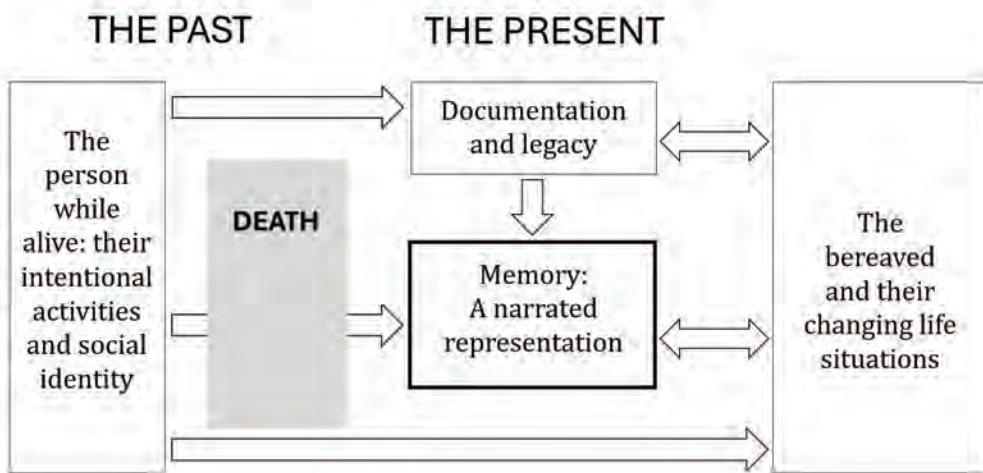
## MEMORY AS AN ASSEMBLAGE

Long-standing memory, in both its individual and collective form, is often made up of smaller bits of information, such as short-term recollections of fleeting moments. It can thus be characterised as a stable but flexible structure, into which new elements can be inserted. While the narrated representation of the deceased can be an individually selected compilation, the continuity of which is corroborated in social communication, it can also contain new information. A memory can be collective in nature and shaped by retellings concerning the same topic that take place in social settings. Despite its relative stability, it is constantly changing and reinterpreted (see Anastasio et al. 2012: 2–3, 46; Apfelbaum 2010: 85–91; Assmann 2008: 100–110.)

Figure 1 (see below) shows how intentional and non-intentional actors serve to create and shape the memory of the deceased, and how the memory itself also acts upon the bereaved. While the basis of the memory has a background in the contribution and the intentions of the deceased while alive, their intentional agency is something that only belongs to the past and becomes detached from the present when they die. In short, death has interrupted and distorted

the intentions and contribution of the dead person and made them something else than they used to be. Death thus underlines that in place of the person, there is now absence, and death and absence prompt the process of building a posthumous memory.

In the present, memory can be said to represent a shadowy presence of the deceased, the contribution and even the intentions of the deceased being carried on in the shape of the material legacy and documentation. This material legacy often includes not only properties or money, but also personal belongings or items that the deceased had owned, used or made while alive. Today, there is usually plenty of documentation about the deceased in the shape of photographs and videos, as well as social media posts, and letters and post-cards, which the deceased intentionally produced. Both the legacy and personal reminiscences are involved in the meaning-making process in which the memories of the deceased unfold. The bereaved attempt to make sense of the fragments they are left with and produce a new representation. This could be called the narrated dead.



**Figure 1.** An assemblage in which narrated representations of the dead unfold. The actors in this network consist of both intentional and non-intentional entities, and the memory itself naturally also affects the bereaved. The long arrow signifies the formative impact that e.g. parents may have had on their offspring.

Narratives about the deceased, like any experience narratives, build partly on facts and partly on the contextual needs and aims of the narrators (see, for example, Siikala 1990). Memory can serve as a building block in both a personal life story or in collective identity-building. A tension between which intentions dominate the posthumous depictions and reputation of the deceased can thus be observed. And gradually, the bereaved move on and view the memory from

a growing distance, which is likely to increase their authorship of the story (Anastasio et al. 2012; Ruin 2019: 103). In other words, the intentional agency of the dead is bound to decrease over time. The memories themselves, shaped by the bereaved and the community to their liking, nonetheless continue to have agency. They can be evoked in new contexts, and may affect the living in ways that neither the deceased nor the bereaved ever intended. Now, I will look at how the agency of the dead emerges in the Finnish materials.

## THE DEAD AND THE LIFE STORY

Especially in the archived reminiscence narratives, the bereaved process the memory of the dead by narrating their story. Bereavement narratives (see, for example, Valentine 2008), which handle and summarise the life and death of an individual, attempt to make sense of the death of the person in question and keep the memory of them alive. Such a postmortem biography can also be seen as a ritualisation of death. It is a means of creating a new identity for the deceased in their new role as a dead person or ancestor. Such narratives often review the life of the deceased, sum up their significance, and weave their life and death into a new meaningful whole. This can be done in public in the form of eulogies and obituaries; it can also unfold as part of discussions among friends, or privately, in a means which never involves presenting the postmortem life story to anyone (Walter 1996). In such private re-narrations of their lives, the bereaved can be seen as forming a new kind of relationship with the dead in which the interaction may occur in the form of an inner dialogue (Silverman & Klass 1996: 16; Valentine 2008: 4). Because there is no active input from the deceased in bereavement narratives, in principle, it is the living that control the interaction.

When reminiscing about the dead, the bereaved commonly highlight memories that they find relevant or which make them feel happy. Recountings of warm memories can refer to a harmonious relationship or a selective image, which only includes memories that they are comfortable with and which are in line with their own life story and identity. My narrators sometimes say that they have decided to forget or suppress certain negative memories. This naturally means that they remember them anyway, but they nonetheless decide which memories they wish to actively reminisce about or include in their own stories about the deceased. To give an example: a woman, born in the 1970s, writes the following about her grandfather, who was an influential character in her home region. ([...] marks a cut from the narrative.)

*Grandpa was part of my childhood in everyday life, so there are numerous things connected to him in my childhood home and the memories are always there. I think about good and happy memories and funny anecdotes about my grandpa. [...] He still affects many*



*people's lives; a strong character has surely left an imprint on his children (my mother and her brothers), but I have not started to delve into those. Instead, I maintain my own grandchild experiences and memories. (K411–412)*

The picture remains ambiguous. The narrator's selection of memories consists of her own childhood experiences and a set of positive stories that the family has circulated. But she is also aware of the tensions and distress her mother's generation experienced with their dominant father. She describes her mother and uncles as bound up with their earlier experiences and hints elsewhere that her mother still struggles with her negative memories. She herself, being in control of the situation, can keep alive her own selection of positive memories, while her mother, due to her own life history, fails to appreciate them. This illustrates the fact that each family member will form a different image of the deceased. Their own personal experiences naturally steer the memory, whether they like it or not. Indeed, the fact that we cannot control the past has been emphasized in memory studies which have focused particularly on traumatic memories and past injustices which tend to resurface and haunt the living in one way or another (see, for example, Etkind 2009; Erll 2011; Vanderstraten 2014). Family members, especially parents, may have had a formative impact which cannot be dismissed. A woman born in the 1930s describes the impact that others have had on her:

*I am a puzzle, a jigsaw. I consist of all the people who have been close to me and who have affected my life. They will live in me for my whole life, every moment. They have pressed their mark onto me. There are beautiful marks and sorrowful marks. Together they form the whole pattern. [...] I cannot escape the impact of my parents. I have to accept it. The way in which they treated me is imprinted on me. Myself, I can only choose how to relate to it, and I have chosen to be grateful. [...] I do not think ill of my mother who never loved me. She simply couldn't do that because I wasn't a boy. [...] I can still hear her voice saying to me even when I was a little child: "You cannot imagine how disappointed I was when you were born. I had so wished for a son." (K168–170)*

Here we can see a discord between the woman's generally serene attitude and the fact that she remembers her mother's cruel words and feels she was never loved. She portrays especially her late mother in a formative role, and herself having to submit to being defined by her. In her story, the lifetime actions of the older generation still continue to make a difference in her life. As these examples show, the long dead relatives can live on as selected narrative constructions, but the living do not always have the power to edit the story to

their liking. There is a limit to how much you can really choose what to include in the stories you narrate about the deceased and yourself.

## THE DEAD BEING KEPT ALONG IN LIFE

In everyday life, the agency of the dead emerges in the world of the bereaved in their thoughts, in discussions and in material objects. Having demised, the dead only have agency in relation to the bereaved who are apt to remember them. Often this takes place in assemblages, in which the bereaved are accompanied with other people or, for example, certain objects or words that evoke the memory. The next example shows the bereaved actively reminiscing over their dead loved ones. Their memory is associated with a variety of entities:

*In my memories, they are all still by my side. There is sure not a single day without some memory coming to my mind. It comes from places, objects, some words or sentences or what I have read, from scents, anniversaries, anything. [...] In my memories and thoughts, in grief and happiness, in everyday life and festivities they come along. I have their image in the bookshelf, in a photo book and photo albums, in the crannies of my mind. Again and again, I fish them out. Again and again in lonely darkening evenings, I light a candle to them, in front of their photo. (K391–405)*

Writers of the reminiscence narratives describe how the legacy of the deceased carries the memory in their everyday life. A male writer highlights intangible forms of such legacy as follows:

*Even now some memory comes into my mind every day, a proverb, a song, a feeling or something else the deceased is somehow connected with. I thus feel that our dead relatives are still living in our lives even though we cannot see them or talk with them. Perhaps the dead live on in the mental legacy that they have left behind in our innermost beings while they were living. This is what I believe. (K54–58)*

The agency of the deceased emerges in language use and other forms of expressive culture. This continuity is felt not only in relation to individuals but also the family and kin. The older generation in particular feel the agency or presence of the dead in handicrafts made by them or in manual skills they learned from the deceased. Some kitchen tools have been inherited from generation to generation and link the successor into a long chain of mothers and grandmothers (Koski 2016a: 8). Material objects can also be used to mediate communication with the dead, as in the next example about a late mother:



*She is present in my life every day in the form of photographs, jewellery, clothes and dishes which I use, and letters and diaries. Reading them is quite hard. They are so vivid, and all grief has been poured into them. I made a kind of memory book myself, too; I glue in it cards, pictures, greetings, and one night I wrote her a "letter" in it since I was missing her and I had many things to tell her. (K171–173)*

The material objects intensify the agency of the deceased. By collecting and producing these materials the writer has increased the presence of her late mother. Intimate texts with a strong emotional content evoke empathy and feelings of connection. Even though the letter will never get an answer, she has the feeling of sharing her thoughts with her mother.

A good example that combines aforementioned forms of agency is the public legacy of the late Finnish ski jumper, the world champion Matti Nykänen (1963–2019). Following his famous sports career, Nykänen had had a colourful life that was eagerly followed by the press, and his cultural legacy consists in particular of original aphorisms and quotes that he was famous for in popular media (see, for example, Wikiquote 2023; Koskinen 2019). As a person, Nykänen left an ambiguous memory: he was known to have problems with alcohol and violence, something which his family members experienced their personal share of, but sports enthusiasts have preferred to cherish a more heroic view. Nykänen's family members have continuously appeared in the afternoon press even after his demise, and in media interviews; Nykänen's daughter has publicly revealed that she had difficult memories concerning her drunk and violent father (Pakkanen 2024). Nykänen's life story has inspired film makers. A movie concerning his sports career came out in 2006, a documentary series about his life in 2023, and a full-length documentary film in 2024, focusing on his personal problems. The representations of Nykänen in the films and media range from funny stories and heroic narratives to dramatic and sad memories.

Recently, a new layer was added to Nykänen's posthumous agency. In 2024, Nykänen's daughter got married. Before the wedding, the press announced that: "The late Nykänen can participate [in] the wedding in a special way." In the text, the bride-to-be stated that she wanted to remember her father and have him along with her on one of the greatest days of her life.<sup>4</sup> The element of participation in question took the form of a golden chain, a piece of male jewellery that the late athlete had given to his daughter. The young couple had had their rings made out of it. As the daughter explained: "The bride's father is expected to take care of the costs of the wedding, but since my father died and can't participate, this is a way in which he can contribute" (Jobe 2024). This case is a good example of how a material object can have agency. The golden chain, the value of which was unknown to the daughter until they had it evaluated at a goldsmith, represented the deceased in a way he may not have originally

intended. The chain itself had agency in that it made it possible for the deceased to participate in some way in the wedding. While the agency of the couple that took the jewellery to the goldsmith's may have been more decisive, the chain itself was a necessary actor in the network that brought about the presence of the deceased. The example also illustrates in a way the absence–presence of the deceased, something which is a typical experience of the bereaved (see, for example, Maddrell 2013). The young bride stated that her father could not participate, but the headline declared he could – albeit in a “special way”. These seemingly contradictory statements point to the ambiguity of creating or perceiving a presence of an absent person.

As in Nykänen's case with the wedding, mediated participation of the deceased can update their memory to include events that took place after their death. This not only happens in frames of significant life events and by help of material objects, but the bereaved can also simply imagine their dead family members participating in topical discussions. For example:

*When I meet my sisters, we always remember our brother and parents. Often we “update” the memories and ask: “What would mother/father say about issues of European Union or daily politics, for example.” (K76–90)*

In short, some families have a habit of producing opinions for the dead about later events that the dead never witnessed. The families maintain and renew the memory of the bereaved in their social communication, ensuring they do not only belong to the past.

As shown above, the nonintentional agency of the dead emerges in memories and social practices: in actor networks that, in addition to the bereaved, may include particular places, special events and social contexts, sensory perceptions, verbal expressions and material objects. The dead, having agency in the network, can contribute to the well-being and identity of the bereaved, but their impact can also be felt as negative or ambiguous.

## THE DEAD VISITING AS INTENTIONAL AGENTS

Some narrators have perceived the presence of their dead loved ones as something that is real and relate their personal experiences of encountering them as intentional agents, reaching out from the other side. Such experiences are usually kept private, but they are discussed anonymously in online forums and often told to those who are nearest. Almost everyone in Finland knows somebody who has experienced an encounter with a dead person. In a broad survey in 2019, 23% of Finns reported having felt the presence of a deceased person (Ketola & Sohlberg 2022: 103–104).<sup>5</sup> Another survey in 2015 showed that 18% of Finns thought that the dead would be able to see the world of the living (Ketola

et al. 2017: 47). While the majority of Finns does not believe it possible to have contact with the deceased, such beliefs are not uncommon. Both the materialist and Lutheran worldviews deny the possibility, and therefore it tends to be assumed that if anyone thinks they have seen a dead relative, it must have been a mistake or a hallucination. The third, theologically correct possibility, that it was a demonic spirit, is nowadays rarely mentioned by the Church, but members of charismatic movements still bring this idea up, for example, in internet discussions (Koski 2016b: 28–29).

In spite of the above, ideas about post-mortem communication circulate in vernacular tradition. They tend to be inspired by close emotional relationships and longing, and are shaped by personal experiences and narratives about the dead. Other discourses that feed into this tradition include ghost stories and esoteric teaching. Traditional esoteric movements like spiritualism and theosophy are somewhat marginal today, but they had a noticeable impact in vernacular discourse in the early 20th century. They thus challenged the existing Lutheran views and offered new insights into relationships between the living and the dead, suggesting that positive contacts beyond the grave could take place. The idea that the dead exist in an invisible dimension around us was something that was supported by the esoteric tradition, as well as the idea that the dead may stay around for a while and then continue to some further stage of afterlife (Koski 2020: 105).

One woman who shared her thoughts in the archived collection felt that her late mother had remained around her to help and support her. She would, for example, ask her mother to help her find a parking lot when she was driving in the city and felt it really worked.<sup>6</sup> The woman nonetheless expected that one day her mother would stop participating in her life and move on to find her own peace and quiet, reflecting the idea of a gradual withdrawal (K200–209). In this case, it is clear that the interaction was initiated by the living, and took place via thoughts and actions. Sometimes, however, the contact is sensory: the deceased is seen, heard or felt. Usually, the perception is fragmentary involving only one or two senses, and lasting for just a short time. Compared to the agency of the living, it seems evident that the intentional agency of the dead in this world is highly restricted. Such an idea is expressed in the following description by a woman who had lost her sister:

*My sister died after a long and tough illness, and when it happened, we were in our summer cottage. My sister came to me in the early hours of the morning: in the light summer night I saw her translucent figure standing near me in the room, and she said only three words to me, as if she only had permission to utter those three words: "I am dead". It was not a dream. I was entirely awake and wondered how it was possible to see this translucent being in a room illuminated by the summer night? (K24–31)*

While it is common for respondents to reassure themselves that the experience was not a dream, dreams have actually become the most common modality for encountering the dead in Finland. The dreamers in question discern dream visits by the deceased as being more vivid and memorable than ordinary dreams (Alasuutari 2017: 180–181; Siltala 2019: 119–120). In such dreams, the deceased often act more freely, since they have not actually crossed the boundary into the realm of the living; it is seen as being easier to enter a dream than waking reality. In the next narrative, ideas relating to the difficulty of crossing the boundary are acknowledged, the husband who visits his fresh widow using multiple channels to communicate:

*My husband died on a journey around midnight, and early in the morning, while I was between sleep and being awake, he came to report to me. It felt as if he touched me, but I told myself that this must have been a cat beside me on the bed. The experience continued as a dream, in which I got up from my mother's bed in my parent's bedroom, got up from her 'position'. She had been widowed a couple of years ago. [...] The heavy atmosphere of the dream gradually dissolved during the morning, but it returned to my mind instantly when the police arrived in the afternoon to tell me about my husband's death. I believe that my husband came to prepare me for the news. [...] Since then I have had some very vivid dreams, in which my husband has come to visit me. I always know that he is actually dead and that the visit is a special occasion, something it is a bit difficult for him to arrange. [...] I believe that these are real visits because these dreams differ from ordinary dreams in terms of intensity, and because he had unusual abilities even when he was living. (K222–224)*

As can be seen here, the narrator justifies the exceptional visits by her husband by referring to the special abilities he had while living: he used to sense and know things in advance. The next example involves another sensory experience:

*I lost my father unexpectedly. He was only 67 when he died – not very old at all. It was Fathers' Day. A couple of days after his death, I experienced something extraordinary. I was sitting at my computer and felt someone touch my shoulders and stroke my hair. I thought my husband had come home but when I turned around there was no one behind me. I went downstairs and called out asking if anyone was there, but no. I am sure that my father visited me. [...] I believe he visited me and wanted to bid farewell. We were truly close and dear to*

*each other. [...] I miss him every day, but I believe we will meet again eventually.* (Suomi24, 2012)

A typical feature of such experience narratives is the way the narrator builds credibility for the narrative by declaring that they first ruled out the ordinary possibilities and only then came to the conclusion that it was the deceased. The assumption that such contact should not have been possible is manifest in the texts in the “as if” structure that narrators use. As here, the narrator also offers a justification for why such a thing should happen between her and her late father: it is because they were very close. Such narratives about continuing bonds reflect the idea that close relationships survive even when the deceased is gone. Indeed, the idea that the dead live on in the hearts of those who loved them is sometimes understood as a powerful factor that helps make it possible for one to meet the deceased.

In first-hand narratives, a common feature is that the deceased appears soon after death to inform others about their death, to bid farewell, or to comfort the bereaved by saying that they are safe and comfortable on the other side. Even in the mid-twentieth century, we find the bereaved worrying about whether the deceased have gone to a good or bad place, referring to heaven and hell. Such a division is less explicit today, but the bereaved seem to worry about the well-being of the deceased. In such situations, visits give them a lot of comfort (Siltala 2019: 171–175).

Even though traditional Lutheran views about an afterlife are nowadays relatively rare in Finnish experience narratives, they still exist. The next example echoes the Lutheran idea of the sleep-like state that follows death and the traditional prohibition against bothering the dead by longing for them too much: it used to be said that it disturbs the dead if the living grieve too much and go on thinking about them. As can be seen, the narrator terribly missed her mother-in-law who had died some years ago. When visiting her grave, she apologized to her in her thoughts, as the following account shows:

*I am sorry I have disturbed your rest selfishly, thinking how different our life would have been if you had lived. I am so sorry. I have hoped so much that you could be alive with us. After this thought, I immediately felt I had a connection with the person in the grave. It was as if understanding and deep peace streamed from the grave straight to my heart. And I felt good and relieved, as if the person in the grave had heard my thoughts and forgiven me for my longing. All this happened as if my own will had not been needed to make the contact happen. The unexpected contact from the bosom of the earth felt self-evident, completely natural. But even though it soothed my mind, it also puzzled me in its peculiarity.* (K24–31)

As in the last three examples, it is usually the case that the dead affect the thoughts and emotions of the bereaved. The living are worried or anxious about something, and they feel better after the contact and the message. Applying Gell's division of roles (see above), in this case, the dead was the agent, and the bereaved the patient. Indeed, the narrators make it clear that they themselves did not initiate the contact. It was the deceased that did it and it was for real. Sometimes it also seems that the bereaved have badly needed the contact and reassurance, and in both academic and vernacular discourse, there have been claims that people subconsciously produce these experiences themselves (see, for example, Koski 2016b). In this context, I am particularly interested in the narrators' own interpretations, which are diverse. The experiences are either felt to have been initiated by the dead as intentional agents, or inspired in one's subconscious mind by memory. Some people are not sure or do not even care about such distinctions, because for them, it is the experiences that make a difference. In an internet discussion about encounters in dreams, one participant commented on their own experience as follows:

*Was it real or a dream, you can't know. But the feeling that remains is good and real. [...] True or not, the point is that it gave me strength.*  
(Suomi 24, 2012)

While the majority of these experiences concern emotions and the personal relationships, other accounts show the dead offering practical advice or expressing their opinions. One woman described getting help from both her late brother and father about where to buy certain supplies or to find a certain tool. Once she was driving alone to the summer cottage that she used to visit with her father. It was winter and the road was covered with snow. Quite near the cottage, a tree had fallen across the road and was preventing the car from being turned or backed. Then she received a message in her brain: "The yellow little saw is in the drawer at the sauna." She knew it was her father speaking, so she went there, found the saw and used it, and thus got through the tricky situation (K91–92).

In most cases, the contacts with the family dead continue or improve the lifetime relationship. And even if there have been problems, the experience may function as a form of reconciliation, as in the next example:

*My father was an alcoholic, which was the main reason why my parents got a divorce when I was little. I only remember my father vaguely, and I hardly had any contact with him in later years. When I was a student, I was once reading an exam book in my room. Suddenly I got the feeling that I was not alone, and I saw my father standing by my desk. I talked with him strangely "in my thoughts", without uttering any words. He apologised to me for never having*



*been a real father to me. I had a good and serene feeling in this situation. The next time I visited home my mother told that she had received a letter that my father had died. (Ilta-Sanomat 2010)*

Sometimes, however, new problems may arise after death if the survivors do not live up to the expectations of the deceased. Such narratives used to be more common in older belief traditions, but they can occasionally still be found in narrations in our times. The next example was shared in an internet discussion about ghost stories by a woman whose husband experienced it:

*My father-in-law died, and before that, he had not wanted the family to change the water container [for the heating system] in their cellar. [After his death,] my husband took his mother home from the hospital. His brother had asked him to check what kind of container they should acquire. When my husband went to the cellar, the lights went out, someone walked outside and knocked on the cellar door. He came up from the cellar and asked his brother, "Why did you switch off the lights?" but the brother said he hadn't. (In earlier years they had used to play pranks on each other: whenever one went down to the cellar to fetch potatoes, the other would disconnect the fuse so that the light went off.) When my husband then left home, in the dim light of the outdoor lamp, he saw something on the stairs and running out into the yard. He thought it was the dog and called to it: "Come here!" But the dog came [from an entirely different direction] from the cowshed attic, stretching himself as if having been sleeping there. It had not been the dog. He started the car and felt as if someone was sitting on the back seat. After a kilometer he stopped the car and checked but there was no one. When he arrived home, he was pale and terrified [and said that] it must have been his father's ghost. And he quit his plan to get a new water container. (Ilta-Sanomat 2010)*

He had not only been startled by what he assumed to be his late father showing his disapproval, but apparently was also positive that his father would continue harassing them if they proceeded with the renewal of the heating system. The reaction of the man refers that he probably perceived the encounter as haunting.

## THE AGENCY OF THE HAUNTING DEAD

As noted above, unwanted and disturbing activity by the dead is often defined as "haunting". In most cases, people think they do not need to be afraid of their own dead loved ones; in such cases, the figures in question are identified as being themselves, rather than ghosts or haunting (*fi kummitus*). "Hauntings"

are more typically associated with dead people who are not next-to-kin, but are rather attached to places, such as haunted houses or sites of violence and death. In the following, I will only briefly discuss such hauntings in relation to agency, in order to enable a comparison to the accounts of contacts with people's loved ones. In most cases, haunting is seen as being a result of suffering or violence. In the first-hand experience narratives of such experiences that I have examined, a person sees or feels something uncanny or disturbing and is later told that something fatal has happened there, usually that someone has committed suicide. The following is a good example:

*I stayed overnight at my friend's house when we were in high school. The house was quite old. The first time I was there I slept restlessly, and every time I woke up, instead of the lamp I saw a man hanging from the ceiling, and he was trying to pull the rope off of his neck, but then started to wheeze, and fell silent. I woke up my friend and said, "I must have had a repeating terrible nightmare half asleep," and I told her about what I had seen. My friend got really frightened and told me that she had heard a story telling of how the adult son of the previous inhabitants had committed suicide in the house. Her parents said in the morning that it was all nonsense. But when the same thing happened the next time, my friend asked them to give us the guest room. There I slept quite well. My friend's parents got curious and inquired about the history of the house. The suicide had involved hanging in that very room, and since then, they had only used it as a walk-in closet. (Ilta-Sanomat 2010)*

Such stories suggest that some people are able to see the fatal event being repeated in the spiritual realm. Traditional belief narratives often tell how after death, sinners had to keep repeating their sin, an over-eager dancer having to dance as a corpse until her socks wore out (Jauhiainen 1998: 94), or a greedy mistress having to return every night after her death to eat the pigs' food (Jauhiainen 1998: 102). Another typical pattern was that sinners had to return to make things right. For example, a man who got more land by moving the boundary marker to his own benefit would have to remain in the original border after death to indicate the right place for future generations (Jauhiainen 1998: 118). In such narratives, the person is shown to lose their free will or even their personality in death, as they are turned into a puppet of a greater moral order. They have become representatives of the sin or moral problem in question.

In a similar way, victims of oppression and violence may appear in the landscape as echoes of a traumatic event (see, for example, Mencej 2021). In a way, they have become ghostly memorials of suffering. In such a role, the dead are regularly seen as symbolic figures rather than real entities. In short, the haunting is viewed as a call for justice, the dead representing the uncanny feelings



that have been evoked by a problematic event. In real life, or in real storytelling, one finds literal and metaphorical interpretations intertwining (Good & Chioventa & Rahimi 2022).

All in all, the agency of haunting figures is somewhat ambiguous. The haunting clearly has an agency in a social discourse, reminding people of relevant problems and warning them about inappropriate actions. All the same, the haunting dead are represented as being in a helpless situation, as victims of their fate. They are deprived of the intentional agency they used to have as living human beings. These haunting dead are, of course, essentially narrated figures. Even in case such stories are based on genuine experiences, the characters have commonly been shaped by narrative patterns and traditional ways of discussing moral problems, suffering and injustice.

## CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, I have been exploring the agency of the dead in the everyday life of the living, with a focus on Finnish narrative materials. The agency of the dead can be approached as intentional or non-intentional. In a material outlook, the dead do not have thoughts and intentions, and their agency only emerges in relation to the living, often represented by memory or material objects. This non-intentional agency can be theorised in terms of nonhuman agency as defined in the Actor-Network Theory. This theory is useful in conceptualising the impact of (the memory of) a deceased person in their new, passive role. In new contexts and assemblages, representations of the deceased may affect the living in ways that were not intended by the deceased.

In many cases, however, it is justified to argue – following Alfred Gell's views – that representations do mediate the agency of their maker. Either the intentions of the deceased have been incorporated into the representation, or the narrative representation of a dead person mediates the intentions of the bereaved who has compiled it. Memories are often selective, and the living may want to choose what they include in their version of the deceased. In addition, narratives can be designed to serve other purposes than to create an accurate image of the dead. If there is, for example, a moral point to make, the characterisation of the person can be fabricated. In ghost stories, the deceased can become narrated figures that are next to fiction.

In the case of close familial relationship, it is not simple for the bereaved to change the narrative of the deceased even though the memory was not entirely happy. If the past events are an integral part of one's own identity, they are not optional in one's story. Especially parents may have such a formative impact on their offspring that it is actually the dead who define the living. If the relationship has been asymmetrical or oppressive, the living may have unwillingly submitted to the role designed by their parents. On a societal level, it can be portrayed as a desirable state of affairs that people get their cultural legacy and

identity from the past generations. According to Hans Ruin, the legacy that represents the dead simultaneously carries their intentions from the past. While the dead do not have intentions in the present, they used to be intentional in the past, and this intentional agency lingers on.

In addition, I explored the intentional agency of the dead who are perceived as conscious beings who contact the living from the hereafter. Such experiences mostly take place in the framework of continuing bonds. According to the first-hand narratives of this kind of encounter, the dead seem to have retained their personality and sometimes have a strong impact on the living, their well-being, their plans and their decisions. Usually, the dead come to greet or bid farewell, but sometimes they can come to reconcile lifetime controversies. Compared to the dead who are simply represented as memory and may not be changed, encounters with the dead as real entities offer the possibility to improve the relationship. Nevertheless, their agency is highly restricted. It is believed that the dead cannot fully reach this world, and they are not allowed to do much. This especially applies to the other type of intentionally returning dead: the haunting dead seem to lack almost all intentional agency, instead, serving a moral argument or as part of an interesting plot. Stories of haunting commonly handle problems that exist in a community or at a societal level, while continuing bonds are essentially something that exist only between family members or friends, underlining that the dead are still part of the community.

Analysing the positions of the living and the dead in the narratives, I looked at the power relations between the living and the dead in their interaction. Intentionality and power do not seem to be directly related. Instead, it is the closest late relatives who exert power, while the agency of the more distant acquaintances is likely to be shaped and manipulated by the living.

## NOTES

- 1 The collection's archival code is "KUOLEMA". I use the abbreviation K accompanied by the page numbers of each contribution.
- 2 In the archived material, none of the writers born in the 1920s and only few born in 1930s had used the digital form to send their story, while every writer born between 1970-1991 had done so. Even without explicit knowledge about age, it is safe to assume that people who discuss death and loss in internet forums are, on average, younger than the participants in the archived collection. Also, descriptions of life situations by some narrators indicate an earlier stage of life.
- 3 Koski forthcoming: Uncertainty of afterlife, reassuring experiences: Online discussions about the dead in dreams. In: Ülo Valk & Kristel Kivari (eds.) *Making Sense of the Uncanny: Interpretive Framings of Epistemological Uncertainty*. Berghahn Books.
- 4 The statement about taking one's deceased father along to an event clearly points to the discourse of continuing bonds, and shows the ordinariness of keeping the deceased around. Such a statement would perhaps not have been expected a couple of decades earlier.
- 5 This particular question has not been regularly included in the surveys. In an earlier round in the 1980s the percentage in Finland was significantly lower, only 14; it was lower than the mean for the whole of Europe, which was 25%, but higher than the Nordic average, which was under 12%. However, Iceland had been excluded because of its exceptionally high percentage, 41 (Haraldsson

2006: 178–179). Iceland's figure of those who have felt the presence of a deceased person has kept over 30% for the last 50 years and was 36% in 2023 (Gunnell 2023: 12).

- 6 This motif is more commonly linked to angels (see, for example, Utriainen 2017: 86–87), and angel beliefs presented by a friend is where this narrator received it.

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# Facing Death

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**Abstract:** This study is based on my fieldwork on lived religion and beliefs among Roman Catholic native Hungarian-speakers in Harghita County, Transylvania, Romania between 1966 and 2016. In the Roman Catholic communities of my fieldsite, phenomena of modernisation and globalisation, as well as the preservation, recollection and transformation of remnants of beliefs and rituals of traditional religious communities were equally present. By exploring the complex questions of death, dying, the path to the afterlife and the afterlife itself, I was able to record personal experience narratives. In the religious communities under study, the motives for the varied forms of communicating with the dead are diverse and complex: there are dualities of knowledge and faith, reason and emotion; even for an individual, conflicting variations are possible; ready-made frameworks and individual, impulsive, emotional attitudes are simultaneously present and have an effect. The strongest motives are the fear of damnation and of prolonged suffering in purgatory, and the social motives that go with it: the ideas of the cohesion of small communities, families, generations, and the idea of the reciprocal relationship of the living and the dead in the same family. A similar role is played by the teaching of the good death, which everyone tries to ensure for themselves and their family members, even if they often practice “empty” rites. This is a testimony to the Church’s role as a constant norm-setter to this day.

**Keywords:** Hungarian Catholics, Transylvania, lived religion, death, dying, afterlife, fear of damnation, reciprocity, ritual fixity

This study is based on my fieldwork on lived religion and beliefs among Roman Catholic native Hungarian-speakers in Harghita County, Transylvania, Romania between 1966 and 2016.<sup>1</sup> In the Roman Catholic communities of my fieldsite, phenomena of modernisation and globalisation, as well as the preservation, recollection and transformation of beliefs and rituals of traditional religious communities were equally present. By exploring the complex questions of death, dying, the path to the afterlife and the afterlife itself, I was able to record personal experience narratives. In these communities, the trends studied were



broadly similar, although personal, narrative manifestations, of course, contained many individual differences.

My argument hinges on what kinds of motivations, personal attitudes and functions facing death has in the lives of individuals and what kind of religious, emotional and societal factors generate and sustain them. In addition to the already vast literature on communication with the dead, I have also been able to draw on important new theoretical insights on some aspects of my topic. These include the experience-centered (Badone 1990; Bennett 1999; Koski 2008) and group-oriented research of the last half century: research on lived religion of small communities (Christian 1989; Stewart 1991; Davies 2007; Gagyí 2010; Bowman & Valk 2012); on belief as lived experience (Gurevich 1992a; Primi-ano 1995; Peti 2002; Bowman 2003/2004; Naumescu 2007; Katajalla-Peltomaa 2020); the study of the relationship of texts and beliefs and various other intertextual approaches (Honko 1964, 1968; Dégh & Vázsonyi 1976; Gurevich 1992b; Hufford 1995; Dégh 2001; Valk 2003, 2008, 2015; Burke 2004; Blécourt 2003; Bowman 2014), as well as “new combinations of source materials and cultural context which offer new insights” (Ohrvik & Guðmundsdóttir 2015: 8; Thomas 1971; Valk 2003); research on the role of emotions (Lutz & White 1986; Metcalf & Huntington 1991; Luehrmann 2018) with a strong emphasis on biblical anthropology of fear, fear of God (Egger-Wezel & Corley 2012; Kruger 2015; Németh 2021), and research on the psychobiological and medical aspects of visionary experiences (Roscher 1903; Parker 1975; Grof 1975; Sabom 1982; Kenneth 1984; Zaleski 1987; Blackmore & Cox 2000; Davies 2003; Rivière 2019).

My data raised numerous problems of interpretation. Given the nature of the subject, I had gathered the relevant data from information I elicited in a collecting situation and gleaned from the textual world of conversations. We know that narrative fictions that spread through oral transmission or in writing and what folklore collectors are told in various speech situations do not always reflect local religious ideas and beliefs alone, or sometimes not at all. They could just as well be carriers, narrative metaphors of concepts that have existed elsewhere or nowhere, or in the distant past, or never although their telling may activate and revive beliefs that have never existed or that were thought to have died. I have attempted to solve the problems presented by having to decipher the belief system from this textual world; however, I do not have sufficient space to detail my methods here.<sup>2</sup>

I also drew on my own studies of religious resilience, which led me to conclude within the broader context of a larger study that the most important sustaining forces of belief and rituals in both lived and official religion in the religious communities studied were:



- 1) An axiomatic set of beliefs and knowledge, closely related to official church doctrines, offering the alternative views of lived religion. Its main points are: belief in life after death; different versions of the concept of body and soul and their relationship – not in line with dualistic Christian doctrines; death as a process, with transitional stages on the way to the afterlife; this world – the world beyond; the different (ecclesiastical and popular) dichotomies/triads of earth–purgatory–hell; the temporary and final passage between the material and spiritual worlds; the diffuse, transitional, living–dead, human–spiritual forms of humans (“dual beings” who are both human and spirit in one person<sup>3</sup>).
- 2) Communication is possible between the two worlds: through biopsychologically given, individually various options: dreaming or seeing visions in a state of altered state of consciousness (ASC) (waking hallucination at the border between dream and wakefulness, visions experienced in a hypnagogic and hypnopompic state, total unconsciousness, rigid cataleptic state, “deep trance”, during which depersonalization, “soul travel” in the spirit world may also appear) (Arbman 1963: II. 591; Siikala 1982: 104). From the individual’s point of view, “encounters” of the same value can occur through the imagination, when a real phenomenon is interpreted as supernatural.<sup>4</sup> Of course, dreaming is not the same psychobiological category as trance (although some people include it among the categories of ASC). From the point of view of the perceiver, however, in some respects, as Peter Dinzelbacher (1981:39) has already emphasized, it is of equal importance. There are significant, revelatory dreams which were considered messages from the supernatural world or visions by medieval visionaries themselves (Meseguez 1963: 34),<sup>5</sup> and therefore, from our point of view, forms of supernatural communication.

Certain kinds of dreams and spontaneous visions are thus a means of direct communication with religious beings, and in this respect they are a form of communal rites that complement official liturgy.<sup>6</sup> In these communities, most people believed in the reality of an afterlife that could be experienced in dreams, in the reality of deities, spirit beings, and the dead – Christian and non-Christian – who manifested themselves in dreams, and in the importance of the messages of the afterlife manifested in dreams. The normative role of the dream otherworld played an important role in their everyday lives (as Peter Burke characterizes those societies where dreams are seen as a way of gaining insight into the other world – a visual representation of the other world) (Burke 1978: 27). This was still the case in many peasant communities in modern Europe in the 20th century. We can observe the presence in these communities of Harvey Whitehouse’s category of imagistic religiosity

(Whitehouse 2004), the importance of lived, visual experience, the emotional attitudes towards religion, the desire for “encounters”, manifested most obviously in dreams and visions.<sup>7</sup> But all this requires traditional knowledge about what significant dreams or visions are usually “seen”, on what occasions and for what reasons.

- 3) The societal factors involved: the importance of family ties in all aspects of the cult of the dead, the public nature of religious practice, discourses on religious experiences, the ongoing normative and controlling role of the Church through the preaching and teaching of local clergy, the reading and writing of popular religious literature, as well as ritual fixity: the retaining power of regularly repeated rituals.

In this article, through some examples, I will outline my research on the motives and personal attitudes of communication with the dead, keeping these factors in mind.

### **“THE DEAD ARE ALWAYS HERE, ONLY WE CANNOT SEE THEM”**

This claim was stated by an 84-year-old woman in 2003 in Gyimesközeplok, and others have said as much, though mostly with hesitation or with reference to the beliefs of “olden times”. However, certain personal experiences or memorates about them suggest that, even if not consciously stated, the presence of the dead is still reckoned with; they are thought to still be monitoring the living, sometimes intervening in their world, and the possibility of meeting the dead at any time during life is present almost to this day. According to some of my data, in crisis situations, the dead can reappear – even many years after the death – offering dreamlike help and comfort to the living. A 65-year-old woman told me in 1998:

*...I have very often, when I was in great sorrow, or in bitterness, or in great trouble, then, oh, how many times I prayed, and then said to myself, though not aloud, “Oh, come, and if you can, help me, now what great trouble I am in, do you know, do you see.” (CS)*

Others spoke of feeling that their departed loved ones were watching over them and protecting them from harm. Again, this underscores the importance of the role of family ties.

The most common of these encounters with the dead seem to be the unexpected appearances of ghosts, usually at so-called haunted places: usually crossroads, boundaries, cemeteries and at traditional times and seasons of the appearance of ghosts. These are souls without status, who do not reach the afterlife and wander in limbo: those who did not receive the rites of integration

into the community of the living or the dead, e.g. baptism, burial; for example, the souls of soldiers who died in battle, suicides, aborted fetuses, babies who died without baptism. Due to the lack of rituals to integrate them into the community they are also excluded from the society of the dead.

Encounters with them at crossroads, at boundaries, in the woods, at night, or at the site of a former war cemetery of soldiers are popular narrative themes, and the narratives also serve as sources of communal entertainment, as well as warnings to avoid sudden death, without receiving the last sacrament. These dead were generally indifferent to people, just asking them for masses, alms for their “redemption” from the in-between, following the pattern of the migratory legends known throughout Central Europe (see e.g. in Müller & Röhrich 1967; Fischer 2010). Despite this, the narrators’ genuine fear of their own future otherworldly exclusion was sometimes palpable, especially in accounts of the rites of *post facto* baptisms of miscarried fetuses crying under the window of the guilty mother. According to a narrative about fear of the ghosts of unburied soldiers,

*...The souls of fallen soldiers must have wandered. ... once they were in Jávárdi, and at night they went to the top of a hill, and someone shouted, and then he shouted back, and then they said something ugly, and he said: “Come here, Berta!”... It was also some kind of ghost. They were so frightened of it. (75-year-old woman, GY 2005)*

In addition to the constant warnings from the church, these encounters and experiences must have stimulated at least the “good Christians” to be more zealous in their duty to care for the dead, to pay for funeral services and prayers and give alms for the dead.

## ATTACKS OF THE DEAD ON THE LIVING

Researchers (especially Eastern Europeans) often distinguish the good dead that is, the community’s own dead who can support their families, and the evil, alien dead who attack the community (see e.g. Vinogradova 1999), but in the minds of local Catholics these are not sharply separated, clearly delineated categories. According to my data, the dead are neither good nor bad, but rather ambivalent and often indifferent to the living. Attacks on human communities and their territories are mostly, but not exclusively, caused by anonymous, alien dead.

One of the characteristic manifestations of aggression by the dead who enter the spaces of the living is that they occupy human settlements and draw them under their negative influence. According to a common narrative type, the evil ones occupy a given human settlement and much like poltergeists cause havoc,

they “spoil” the furnishings, everyday objects of people living there. There are numerous, deeply believed, fearful individual accounts of this phenomenon. According to an 84-year-old woman (talking about the dead who sometimes also appear in windstorms or in the whirlwind):

*... All of a sudden loud screaming [...] it was coming this way from the shack and it went through its door, it threw back the door, and then such a wind, a whirlwind came in, into the shack and it cleaned up the foot cloths, the sandals and that fireplace, that everything was totally dry, the ashes, everything was gathered together. Nothing was left inside. Then they started to pray... (GY 2006)*

Another widespread type of narrative is about the dead calling out the victim, whom they try to snatch, carry with them or lead to death or damnation. This belongs to the so-called *Nachzehr* beliefs (Schürmann 1990), widely distributed in Europe, in many different kinds of variants which share the axiomatic idea that “the dead take the living with them into death”<sup>8</sup>. According to the Gyimesközéplok and Csíkkarcfalva variant: if they knock or bang at the door at night, it is not advisable to go out, because the dead take those who step outside with them. For example:

*...some dead person appeared in the form of such a ghost, and sometimes it happened that they lured him outside at night too, and they heard music, and then they went out, and they took him somewhere far in the forest, and there they put him down... (CJ 1998)*

Many spoke about being transported by the evil dead as a personal (dream or vision) experience which they described as a psychic disturbance: disorientation, getting lost. Narratives speak about the taking away of the mind, of wits (a kind of emic category of the soul), while at the same time they are also interwoven with images of bodily snatching, bodily exhaustion, as well as the otherworldly symbol of getting lost.<sup>9</sup>

One of the most common manifestations of the assault of the evil dead is “pressing” while in bed at night (“goes onto him/her”, “keeps going onto her/him”). Conceptualizations of pressing are symptom- and reality-based: they can be associated with feeling unwell, experiencing distinctive sensations of pressure, difficulty breathing; they may be connected to nightmares, erotic dreams, and to sleep paralysis. Pressing may appear on the border between sleep and wakefulness and be accompanied by other bodily experiences (trembling, tingling) and vivid auditory or visual hallucinations, and at times even the sensation of flying or out-of-body experiences. As a universal neurobiological phenomenon, the anthropology of religion has documented it among

almost all the peoples of Europe: during these visions “believers” usually sense a locally recognized demonic being, or an assaulting dead person (Kiessling 1977; Hufford 1982; Davies 2003; Rivière 2019). A 42-year-old woman from Gyimesközéplek spoke about it, thus:

*...I didn't dare to go to sleep, I was so scared to go to sleep, and so I was sprinkling the bed with holy water all the time, and while I was praying I put the prayer book right here, because I was afraid in case I should go to sleep lying in a supine position, and that gave me a dream straight away, and that horrible unpleasant feeling that pressed down on me. [...]*  
(Éva: And what do you think it was?)  
*Evil. Yes, it was evil itself.* (2006)

The naming of the dead as “evil” (*gonoszak, rosszak*), “unclean ones” (*tisztátalanok*) may equally refer to the devil or to the diffuse, transitory categories between “evil dead” and devils.<sup>10</sup> This was often also expressed by informants, thus:

*The devil [...] knocks, rumbles, scares people when they are alone [...], it's also possible that the dead appear.* (CJ 1998)

Attack by either the devil or by the dead sometimes seem to be alternative explanations of the same phenomenon,<sup>11</sup> both may be present concurrently in the same narrative; for example, a woman from Csíkszenttamás in 2002 spoke about a series of diabolic visions, in one of which her dead father appeared in the shape of the devil, whom she – as is customary with the devil – sent away in the name of Jesus.<sup>12</sup>

The main reason why the dead and Satan's demons from hell diffusely coalesce in the minds of the people of Gyimes and Csík is the vague tenets of the Christian church. The integration of the basically non-Christian notion of “revenants” into Christianity happened along a tortuous route dotted with many debates between religious and secular elites, and among the different Christian denominations – and these debates have basically not been settled to date,<sup>13</sup> thereby contributing to the classification of the assaulting dead as “devils”.<sup>14</sup>

Many individual accounts tell us about fear of demons in this context, especially in individual crisis situations, primarily in the case of women in confinement, and the temporary “outcast” state of her newborn, which lasts from giving birth until the church ceremony “initiating” (blessing) women following childbirth and in the case of the newborn, until baptism. Many personal accounts told of the demon beliefs and fears of mothers whose exposure to the assaulting dead was heightened (because of their special state). According to a memorate from Gyimesközéplek:

*...it pressed me too, when I was in childbed [...] something came in through the door, and lo and behold [...] it steps in front of the bed [...] Oh, once something was pressing me so much, I could neither breathe, nor lift my hand... (2002)*

Some forms of attacks by the dead can also be interpreted as compensation of the liminal dead for being excluded; possession is an aggressive form of their striving for inclusion through imposing themselves on the community by force. The additional or repeated performance of rites of passage after death may be an important tool of protection against aggressive assaults (for example, a fictive baptism, a “second” burial, or the performance of prayers, or almsgiving with which the liminal transitional beings are reintegrated into their family).<sup>15</sup> All of this indicates that notions of attack by the evil dead and the practice of protecting against them may also have had an important normative role in these village communities and in ensuring good relations between the living and the dead.

### PREPARING FOR A GOOD DEATH – FEAR OF DEATH, HELL, SATAN

Central to religious life in the Catholic communities studied was the idea of being a good Catholic, which flowed through many channels from the ecclesiastical authorities, and which included the aspiration to a good death, and in this context the fear of damnation and hell. These are the basic factors that generate the emotional and behavioural responses to facing death and which in other respects cause people to refrain from committing sins.

Even premonitions of one’s own death, portents of death, dreams of death, with their symbolism of death, hell or, less often, heaven, play a *memento mori* role in the life of the individual. In 2005, an 84-year-old woman in Gyimesközéplok said that she believed that the dead often appear to old people approaching death; she often saw her loved ones in her dreams. The most common narrative theme in dreams about death is that if the dead person in the dream gives the dreamer something: apples, water, clothes, etc, this means that he or she “gives life”. If, however, he or she asks for something, it means death. But dreams of falling buildings, tooth loss, tooth extraction, known to be portents of death all over the country are also commonly dreamed about and recounted, and many commonplace occurrences (such as a dog howling loudly, an owl hooting loudly on the roof, a fruit tree suddenly drying up, a light suddenly flashing on and off at night) are also interpreted as portents of death. People pay increased attention to avoiding a “bad” death for themselves and their family members, i.e. death without sacraments, and to accepting death with peace and resignation in the hope of salvation. Many of my interlocutors



spoke about these cases with strong emotions, empathizing with the fear of death of their friends and loved ones, and being motivated to pray for them:

*I trust only in prayers, and in God, and through them that we may not go to hell. And let's help whomever we can, by praying... (70-year-old woman, GY 2003)*

Some prayed every day for a good death, which included avoiding sudden death at night, i.e. the assaults of deadly demons that attack at night. For this purpose, there were many prayers, which only existed in oral tradition, which were recited by older women every night, but especially every Friday during my field research. The conclusion of one such prayer, for example, goes thus:

*Whosoever learnt this prayer,  
Says it in the evening as he/she goes to bed,  
In the morning upon waking,  
Even at the hour of his/her death,  
The gates of hell shall shut,  
The gate of heaven shall be opened,  
And they shall be carried to blissful heaven. Amen.  
(65-year-old woman, GY 2003)*

The text also refers to the death of Christ on Good Friday; the prayer is to be recited up to three times on Fridays in remembrance of this: "...whoever recites it ... three times on Friday, all their sins are forgiven" (65-year-old woman, GY 2003). A 74-year-old woman prayed for her sick husband:

*Who knows how he'll get there or where he'll get to or what. It is only for this reason that those of us who can [...] should pray. (GY 2007)*

One woman was awakened to the possibility of dying without receiving the last sacrament by her nocturnal feelings of pressure (which she attributed to a demon attack):

*...I was paralysed. I could not raise my hand. [...] I knew how to pray, [...] in my mind it was there. [...] all the time when I went to bed, all I'd say was: Dear God, keep me from the evil one and bad dreams... (40-year-old woman, GY 2008)*

The good death of a dying family member was assured by putting a consecrated candle into his or her hand. This is about getting out of purgatory as soon as possible:

*...when the sick person is dying, he or she is also given a consecrated candle in his hand. [...]. So he or she goes to the other world, we were taught that, then he or she comes closer to God sooner, [...]* (70-year-old woman, GY 2011)

Well-known parables and pictorial representations from Christian prints also feed the fear of bad death: these depict angels and devils fighting for the souls of the dead, or souls suffering in the fire of purgatory. An 84-year-old woman saw a photo

*...belonging to my brother Géza, of how sad the souls suffering in the cleansing fire of purgatory were [...] In purgatory, everyone has to suffer according to the amount of sins he or she committed...* (GY 2008)

And whoever goes to hell suffers in eternal hellfire, imagined quite concretely:

*...I imagine your hand is just barely touched by a spark and you are burnt. And day and night [...]. They must burn there for ever and ever...* (84-year-old woman, GY 2008)

I could not record much about the fears of hell of sinners directly, but many stories about them were circulating as parables for righteous living. Many of my interlocutors spoke about these cases with strong emotions, empathizing with the fear of death of their friends and loved ones, and being motivated to pray for them:

*I trust only in prayers, and in God, and through them that we may not go to hell. And let's help whomever we can, by praying...* (42-year-old woman, GY 2007).

## ON DEATHBED-VISIONS AND NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCES

Some archaic beliefs hold that the soul of a mortal undergoes a special transformation before death. As a semi-spiritual, transient being, he or she can gain insight into the world of the dead, or appear as a ghost to his or her relatives, signalling his or her own death. This view is the basis of the *deathbed visions* that I have repeatedly recorded as personal experiences. In most cases, the dying person sees deceased family members, who call him or her to them. An 88-year-old woman recalled her own experience:

*It happened to me, it's real. When my husband was very ill, [...] he was looking, looking at something, I said, my God, what can Károly be looking at, [...]. And I said to him: Károly, what are you looking at? And he says, my mother. [...] and two days later he died. (CS 1998)*

The narratives also indicate the close ties with dead ancestors: that the generations whose memories are still alive are part of the family, even after their death; there is also the underlying hope of a family reunion in the after-life. Some of these personal memories are about a dialogue with dead relatives, in which reciprocity is also expressed: they do not forget the living who also cherish the memory of the dead with rituals helping them to better their fate in the afterlife. According to some of my data, the dying person, or possibly the relatives around her/him, also had a vision of a struggle between an angel and some devils for the soul.

*I heard from my mother that a man was dying, and was very distraught. Those who were there saw that there were devils beside the dying man, and they realized that the soul wanted to leave, but always withdrew because it was afraid of the devils. And they heard a voice saying, "Jump on his chest, and squeeze the soul out of it!" And one of those who were there noticed that on the top of the oven an angel was sorrowful. (CT 1996)<sup>16</sup>*

These events are perceived as reality by all the narrators and serve as *memento mori* and to relieve fear of death. This is even more so in the case of the dying's visions of the afterlife, or *near-death experiences* (NDE). The locally known framework of this universal phenomenon (Zaleski 1987; Dinzelbacher 1989) is the belief that the dying or the dead should not be mourned too much immediately after death, because they will be "wept back to life"; he or she will come back to life; this is an occasion for the narration of afterlife visions. These short stories are usually very suggestive, and in most cases, they are about a good death, a beautiful heaven. These texts obviously also played a role as parables of the hope for a good death. I quote from 1988:

*My mother's mother's mother was in such a state of ecstasy. She slept for three days, she always slept. They couldn't wake her up [...] when she woke up, her daughter-in-law said to her, "Oh, mother, you've been asleep for a long time." "I did not sleep at all! I was not sleeping, my daughter, but I was in a very beautiful place. I saw St. Elisabeth, Anne, Emerence." She spoke to them. And that she would soon be taken into their company. The next day she died. She fell asleep ... (CK)*

## AFTER DEATH – COMMUNICATION WITH THE RECENTLY DECEASED

The attitude towards the newly dead is ambivalent – even in cases considered to be ideal by community members. A general fear of death is also apparent in the fear of specific newly dead persons (who in some memorable cases attacked their own family in the form of a malevolent demon), but there are also continuing measures on the part of relatives to ensure the good fate of the dead in the afterlife. It transpires from this that there is a hope that the afterlife of both the deceased and those still living will be in accordance with a good death, assured by mutually taking care of each other. The purpose of communication with the deceased relative is to relieve tensions between the living and the dead, and to reciprocally make up for any shortcomings that may have arisen. The main theme of the dialogues is the journey of the dead to the other world, their fate in the other world, which serves to reassure that the ritual obligations of the living have been fulfilled. In addition, it is important to finalize the affairs of the deceased, which may equally include missed farewells, possible shortcomings in the funeral sacraments, or the completion of unfinished business of the deceased, finding his or her lost objects, counselling, thanking the living and soothing their conscience. My data shows that the two most common themes are that the dead person is looking for a hidden object, or asking for a mass or prayer to shorten his or her time in purgatory. So, reflecting the close relationship between the living and the dead, he or she is concerned with both earthly life and the afterlife.

The communication is manifested in dreams, visions and imaginings, framed by axiomatic beliefs about the body and soul, which seem to be vague and unclear, but this does not seem to bother the people who talk about them. For example: the soul of the deceased does not die at the same time as the body; the dead person who is still lying in the house for three days and the body already in the grave can be communicated with “bodily”. His/her soul remains in the house until the funeral, but at the same time it leaves for the afterlife, where it continues to live on spiritually, in its physical reality, etc. It was believed by many that the soul still lingers around the house for six weeks after death, visiting the scenes of its life. According to a story told by an 84-year-old woman, the soul, separated from the body, accompanies the deceased to the cemetery:

*... when they carry it, the soul takes off somewhere, [...] Only that no one could see it. And they go out, they take it out, when they put it in the pit, two beautiful white doves arrive from the east, and two black ravens from the west. And then the angel with the kompona ['scales'] do you know what kompona is? It weighs [...] the angel weighs whether the good deed is about as heavy as the bad deed. If the bad*

*deeds outweigh the good ones, then those black ravens, those devils [...] they take the soul, they take it to hell. And if there are more good deeds then the soul goes to purgatory. (GY 2003)*

The somewhat ambiguous views of the local clergy also contribute to the contradictory nature of these not entirely harmonious conceptualizations: I myself have witnessed the parish priest's various pronouncements on whether the dead could come back. The official position is that they are not coming back. However, he also stated that the return may also be experienced, but then it was actually the devil that appeared, disguised as the deceased. In one particular case, he even performed an exorcism ritual to cleanse the house. (So even the ambiguous devil doctrines of the Catholic Church influence the picture.)

Other popular narratives are about those who are left behind and wonder about their own future fate. A text from a 40-year-old woman collected in 2008:

*...when my godmother died, her daughters cried because she was a good woman, [...] I prayed for her in the evenings, [...] one night I dreamed of her that she had come back from the other world. We had a conversation, [but she did not touch] me, because they said it was not good for the dead to touch or kiss someone. [...] She had a beautiful white dress that was tied around her waist. And I said, "Well, godmother, what's it like on the other side?" And she said to me, "leave it alone, when you die you'll know." And I said, "Well, well, well, but what shall I say to her daughters, for they cry so hard that she's gone." And she said: "Tell them not to cry, for I'm in a very good place". (40-year-old woman, GY 2008)*

The events of communication with the most recently deceased of the family are said to take place mainly during the 40 days following the death (while he or she is still believed to be close by the family), and then become less frequent as time passes, but some testimonies suggest that crisis situations could revive them (for example, some people prayed for healing to their dead mother who appeared in their dream, while also praying to the Virgin Mary). Often, the later dates of the appearance of the dead in dreams and visions coincided with the date of the 40 days and then the anniversary mass for the deceased's salvation, which was celebrated in keeping with Church liturgy, or with the date of a Mass held for him or her that could be paid for at any time.

The dead of the family may (in rare cases, it seems) act as the attacking dead in the early post-funeral period. At such times, fear of the exclusion of one's own dead can be quite significant. The narrator of the following memorate was "pressed" by her aunt until the latter was buried, and then the series continued by other dead members of the family:

*... I was awakened but had not yet gone back to sleep, [...] I heard the door open, I heard footsteps, [...] as if someone had come to the front of the bed. And then I just felt that it was so interesting just as when you have the shivers, [...] such an interesting tingling went through my body, [...] I could not turn, neither could I move or speak, [I could not do] nothing. [...] Then I thought that, I said, one of them, either my brother, or Jancsi came back. They forgot something, they came back...*  
(50-year-old woman, GY 2006)

As for the dead of the community in general, according to the Catholic liturgy, mass is obligatory for them on the feasts of the dead (All Saints' Day and the Day of the Dead in Catholic practice, Easter and Pentecost in the Orthodox calendar).<sup>17</sup> Anyone can, and many people do, pay for these as a means of shoring up credit for their own salvation; it constitutes part of being a "good Catholic". An ardent Catholic, a 40-year-old woman justified her Mass payments in this way: "... yes, I will die too..." (GY 2006). Another 40-year-old woman said:

*...I imagine that I too will get this from those left behind. It will be good for me too, when I get there, to have someone do it for me.*  
(GY 2008)

It is clear that it is the ecclesiastical rituals of caring for the dead that keep alive and trigger the non-church views and rituals of visionary communication with the dead; the occasions for communication are facilitated by ritual fixity, several aspects of which are exemplified by these narratives. The importance of fulfilling ritual obligations to the dead is underscored by the same childless woman's fear that her fate in the afterlife will be left unattended. As a solution to this problem, she told about the case of a woman in a similar situation, who regularly paid the priest to say a special prayer for her at the Day of the dead mass for the anonymous dead of the community. The Church also gives special encouragement to prayers for the dead and alms paid for their redemption (to the Church, in fact!) on organised occasions of "full redemption":

*It was on All Saints' Day that for eight days, from the first to the eighth, whoever confessed, took communion, whoever said this Creed, the Lord's Prayer, the Hail Mary, the Glory could save souls from purgatory. On the radio<sup>18</sup> there's Father Selymes, he also emphasizes very often when we can have these full redemptions, [...] not for my benefit, but for the souls in purgatory who are waiting to be released...*  
(40-year-old woman, GY 2008)



Traditional notions of space and time also contribute to the persistence of these views: the time of the dead (the period between Christmas and Epiphany, as well as the ‘week of the dead’) and the places of the dead (cemetery, cross-roads, boundaries, circles, ritually established by circumambulation) are subject to the periodic jurisdiction of the dead, when they can be embodied as living beings in the earthly world and even evoked by symbolic rites. During these periods, some people were looking forward to the appearance of their dead, and to providing them with food and drinks prepared specifically for them; others feared encounters with the evil dead at marked places; for example with ghosts – who could appear – at the crossroads or at boundaries and attack in the shape of animals, too.

Behind the rituals of alms-giving and caring for the dead, certain ancient notions of fate can also be discovered. Many people stated that the length of life and the time of death were determined by “fate”, “luck”, God Himself, or by one’s predetermined lifespan. For example, a 74-year-old woman told me that she goes to confession and takes communion weekly (on special Friday occasions organised by the priest) so that she is always ready because:

*The Good God [...] ordains the living day, and he gives it, and he metes out death...if he wills us to die by night, we die by night; if he wills us to die by day, we die by day. ...as the Good God has decreed the living day, death must follow. [...] when you are born, you have what you have to go through in the lifecourse. (74-year-old woman, GY 2011)*

Related to these views of fate is the idea, already mentioned above, that the soul of those people who “do not die their own death” becomes outcast: they cannot reach the other world: one’s “own death” is a death that occurs at the predetermined time.

*... as long as people have their living days, they cannot go to death. [...] and if they commit suicide before that time, they will not be admitted, they will have to ramble around [until their life time is up] ... (66- and 65-year-old women, GY 2003)*

Some people tried to avoid the disadvantages of sudden death by fasting: for example, they fasted for nine Tuesdays in a row:

*They will fast the same day. No eating until noon. And only a little at noon. They do not strain their stomach. They pray. And it is said that they will not leave the world without the sacraments. They cannot pass away. (80-year-old woman, GY 2003)*

These negotiated vows (practised not only in matters of death) are as much an ancient feature of the religiousness of the people of Gyimes as the “feared” Old Testament God himself.

## DREAMS, VISIONS OF GUILTY PEOPLE – PUNISHMENTS IN THE AFTERLIFE

The subjective motivation for the images of otherworldly journeys is the archaic, axiomatic belief that the everyday people, as spirits or in their corporeal reality, can also pass into the otherworld of the dead temporarily, even during the “little death” of a dream or vision. The objective reasons for this belief can be sought in both official Christian and apocryphal concepts of the afterlife.

From my data, it seems that especially among older people, fear of death, or at least dreams of journeys to hell, which are dominated by the symbolism of dying, are common; sometimes they see someone (an enemy, an ill-wisher) being punished in hell. In the largest number of hell visions or dreams, sinners or the perpetrators of specific sins were seen to suffer. These are usually educational stories, told as an exhortation to a pious life, as a deterrent. The narrative of journeys to the afterlife may also have been inspired by prayer books and religious chapbooks. In the villages studied, the most striking connection is with the chapbooks and the manuscripts copied from them, including Mary’s visit to hell, which are still known throughout the Balkans and among the eastern groups of Hungarians.<sup>19</sup> I also encountered such copies in Gyimes, in the copybooks of women (not only old people!), which they lent to each other and copied from each other.

According to this story, the Archangel St. Michael leads the Virgin Mary into the various “pits” of hell, showing her the varied punishments for each sin. The most serious sins are against the family, children, fertility, secondly theft and murder, but blasphemy, sexual immorality, smoking – especially women’s smoking – also occupy a prominent place in the list of sins, followed by a long list of minor offences, such as miserliness, laziness, drunkenness, non-attendance of church and neglecting the duties of pious life (e.g. almsgiving), etc.

Usually the narratives are specific, about a locally known sinner’s visions of hell, or perhaps about his own experience of hell. The personalized human-faced, corporal punishments of the known apocryphal story can easily be replaced by concrete cases today. A man who, according to the narrative, had been in hell in his sleep for three days:

*... on the third day, he woke up, saying [...] here was a man who had stolen cows. He took them to Gheorgheni and tried to sell them [...] This Laji Suszter leads a grey, stupid cow forever in hell [...] He leads it forever, and offers it to everyone, but no one buys it...*

Those who dream up visions of hell often see their own family members or acquaintances punished. For example, husbands who persuade their wives to have abortions are tied up in stables, on all fours, as domestic animals, or women who slander their fellow humans are hanged by their tongues, and so on.

The personal experience of another villager, standing before the judgment seat of God in his sleep, was recalled by an acquaintance:

*...He slept day and night. And he had a great fever. [...] he knew that he must die [...] "I also knew", he said, "what sins I had committed, for I had cursed like that before, and how bad I had been" [...] then there was a big building, they went up with a ladder, they went up, they had to face the reckoning, there was a big bearded man, there was a great big building, and then a big bearded man, [...] he was seated on a big chair, and then they went in front of him one by one, and the one who was good, [...] he waved upwards, he went upwards, the other one [...] downwards. [...] And then he started to go to the judgment seat, [...] And he was so afraid that if that door opened, he would go down, because he already knew that he had done wrong. [...] He said that he had once gone to the gates of death, and came back to earth healed.*  
(50-year-old woman, GY 2006)

This “human” God-figure is otherwise typically depicted in stories about punishments for transgressors against work prohibitions on holy days and other prohibitions, as an Old Testament, law-and-norm-giving, justice-giving person who inspires awe, to whom no one ever appeals for mercy or help. The latter functions are fulfilled by Jesus, the Virgin Mary and certain female saints. The God who dispenses justice and determines destiny is rather a source of fear, which means first and foremost fear of death. Fear of one’s own death or of hell, either explicitly or implicitly, pervades all forms of communication with the dead.<sup>20</sup>

The narratives also play a role in mediating proper Christian norms, in regulating behaviour: the narratives often conclude with recounting that the person who had visited hell mended his or her ways. A person travelling to hell in a dream by train saw hell open up:

*... and that they suffer. And what, how much the souls suffer. Oh [...] he could not explain what a terrible sight it was. [...] the devils were uglier and uglier, they were leaping up, [...]. He woke up [...]. "And so somehow," he says, "I thought to myself: oh my God, we're going to die, and that's not good. I'd better not go to the tavern, I'd better go to church. I go to confession, I take Holy Communion, I live for God."*  
(86-year-old woman, GY 2008)

A long-dead member of the community whose faults were much criticized by his wife, was once said to have

*slept for three days, and when [...] he came to himself [...] he told his wife [...] what he [...] had seen, but he said that hell was a terrible place, how they were tormented there, and how they burned, and would never be saved. And then his wife stopped scolding him.*

(84-year-old woman, GY 2003)

International migratory legends have also influenced local conceptualizations: for example, the legend of abortionists forced to eat their own foetus also appears here as a parable. Metaphors translating the “ineffable” numinous into the language of everyday reality as well as the narrative symbols of the other world<sup>21</sup> are present in the narratives of dreams, which can enter the narrative stock of a community from the outside through international migratory legends and from religious chapbooks as well.

In addition to the chapbook readings, the vivid images of Hell are also influenced by church and monastery frescoes of hellish punishments, painted in realistic detail.<sup>22</sup> Although this is primarily an Orthodox feature (the other world and the Last Judgement were much less frequently depicted in Latin Christian churches), Roman Catholics may occasionally have been able to see these scenes, or at least have been familiar with folkloric tales of the afterlife inspired by monastic frescoes.

The fact that sinners never travel to purgatory, which appears in church literature and liturgy from the 13th century onwards (Le Goff 1981) is a testament to the ancient roots of these stories about hell. This has puzzled some and forced people to attempt to explain: narrators try to reconcile the conflicting doctrines.

## CONCLUSION

To summarise my brief, necessarily incomplete overview, I can say the following: In the religious communities under study, the motives for the varied forms of communicating with the dead are diverse and complex: the dualities of knowledge and faith, reason and emotion; even for an individual, conflicting variations are possible; ready-made frameworks and individual, impulsive, emotional attitudes are simultaneously present and having an effect. The strongest motives are the fear of damnation and of prolonged suffering in purgatory, and the social motives that go with it: the ideas of the cohesion of small communities, families, generations, the idea of the reciprocal relationship of the living and the dead in the same family. The family bond with the dead, the

role of the dead in helping the living to overcome the fear of hell, seems to be a deeply rooted tradition, also lurking in the consciousness of quasi-“unbelievers”, which may come to life in crisis situations or at the approach of death. The caution against violating religious prohibitions, the guilt of those who transgress them and the condemnation of others, can all be traced back to the ancient motives of the fear of hell. This is a testimony to the Church’s role as a constant norm-setter to this day. Fewer and fewer people take seriously the threat of hell for sins, but fears will not be completely allayed as long as Christian supernaturalism lives on. A similar role is played by the teaching of the good death, which everyone tries to ensure for themselves and their family members, even if they often practice “empty” rites. Due to the role of ritual fixity, almost everyone here is still considered a “good Christian”. Perhaps the “bad Christians” could be also counted, but how many are true believers remains a perennial mystery to the researcher.

## NOTES

- 1 At Csíkkarcfalva, Csíkjenőfalva and Csíkszenttamás (Romanian Cârța, Ineu, and Tomești, Harghita Co, Romania) 4 weeks between 1986–1988, at Gyimesközéplak (Romanian Lunca de Jos, Harghita Co) altogether roughly 10 months in shorter bouts between 2002 and 2016. From now on I will use the Hungarian names (when they appear in a sentence) or their abbreviations: Csíkkarcfalva=CS, Csíkjenőfalva=CJ, Csíkszenttamás=CT, Gyimesközéplak=GY. In the case of data provided verbatim, I disclose the time of collection, as well as the gender and age of the informant (except in a few cases where I was unable to obtain information about these). I refrain from disclosing the names of the informants out of respect for their privacy.  
 Ágnes Hesz was carrying out fieldwork in Gyimesközéplak concurrently with me. Especially with regard to the cult of the dead we had many similar observations and conclusions; I learned a great deal from her writings and the data she generously put at my disposal (Hesz 2012a, 2012b, 2020).
- 2 For a detailed discussion of the problem with respect to the Gyimesközéplak community see my paper: Pócs 2012.
- 3 Such as humans and their living or dead spirits/alter egos, or fairies, or “animal people”, etc. See for example Peuckert 1960, Lecouteux 1992; Pócs 2023.
- 4 “Kasuale Begegnung” with the supernatural: Honko 1962: 91–126.
- 5 For example, Pedro Meseguez (1963: 136–182) differentiates between telepathic, prophetic and mystical dreams.
- 6 As many authors have already stated in connection with religious dreams, among them Jacques Le Goff (1984: 200). Eric Dodds says in connection with the “irrationality” of ancient Greeks that dreams provide an opportunity for encountering far-away people, gods and the dead and for establishing personal contact with the deity (Dodds 1951: 102–107).
- 7 In this context, I would like to mention the research of Lehel Peti, who deals with these aspects of imagistic religiosity in several studies on the religiousness of the Moldavian Csángó people, spatially close to my own research (Peti 2008). Also in nearby villages in Harghita county, József Gagyí has also dealt with certain aspects of the role of dreams and visions in the community (Gagyí 2010). Both of their studies have provided important lessons for my own research.
- 8 A related phenomenon is the widespread notion in areas dominated by Roman Catholicism that in the transitional “deadly” period around Christmas and New Year teams of the dead constituted

- by damned souls, or souls in Purgatory, at this time march along “their” roads that they have taken over from the living, and they snatch all living people they encounter on their way. See, for example: Waschnitius 1913; Meisen 1935; Kuret 1975; Ginzburg 1983: 33–68; Schmitt 1994: 135–147, 160–165.
- 9 A rather widespread symbol in tales, legends: cf. Mencej 2020.
  - 10 Similar categories that have been born of a combination of the demon doctrines of the church and folk conceptualizations are known all over Central-Eastern Europe: they mean souls that are in some kind of relationship with the devil and damnation, for example a dead person who had been possessed by the devil in his lifetime, or often a vampire and/or a soul who had died an extraordinary death, who is wandering and cannot get into either heaven or purgatory, whose figure more or less merges with the devil (in Russian beliefs see e.g., Maksimov 1994: 5–27; Ivanits 1989: 39–49; among Serbs: Zečević 1981: 128; among Romanians: Muşlea & Bîrlea 1970: 163–170). With respect to Hungarian data the “unclean ones” (*tisztátalanok*) of Mezőség are such beings (Keszeg 1999: 91–95, 313–31), and in many places they also considered the attacking dead called “evil ones” (*rosszak, gonoszok*) to be half devils.
  - 11 About the diffuse blending of the figures of the dead, devils and the ghost in detail: Stephens 1949; Pócs 2022.
  - 12 Collected by my former student, Ágnes Mondok. She did not disclose the name and age of her interlocutor.
  - 13 The existence of revenants and ghosts already preoccupied the early church fathers, and for a long time the church did not question it. Although St. Augustine (354–430) definitively distinguished between revenants and Satan’s demons, their identification with each other took place quite quickly; 3rd–6th century church fathers debated whether the phenomenon was a bad dream or an illusion, or a demonic attack; medieval exorcism formulae were applied to the dead in the same way as to the devil (Franz 1909: II. 549). Reformation in the predominantly Protestant areas of Europe halted this process; the question of ghosts became a weapon in the theological battle between the denominations (see e.g. Brown 1979; Ombres 1984; Paxton 1990; Johnston 1999; Marshall 2002).
  - 14 There are numerous Western and Central European data for the very early diabolization of poltergeist phenomena known from all over the area of Latin Christianity, as well as for the exorcism of ghosts carried out by priests (Thomas 1971: 570; Brown 1979: 34–54; Di Nola 1987; Schmitt 1994: 156–157; Davies 2007: 73–79).
  - 15 For more detail, see Pócs 2019.
  - 16 A widespread Central-Western European vision i.e. narrative; recorded since the 11th century (Dinzelbacher 1989; Uther 2010).
  - 17 About the Latin and Orthodox, 30- and 40-day calendar cycles in Europe: Ranke 1951; Schneeweiss 1961, pp. 103–104.
  - 18 “Mária-Rádió” is broadcast for Hungarian-speaking Catholics in Transylvania, Romania.
  - 19 The vision of the guilty in hell presented by the guide first appears in the 2nd century Apocalypse of Peter (Gardiner 1989: 6–7), and then in the vision of Tundal/Tungdal/Tundalus recorded in 1149 (Gardiner 1989: 252–253; Dinzelbacher 1999: 202); the individual sins and their drastic punishments are presented in the details we are familiar with today. This vision was extremely popular throughout late medieval Europe; it has been translated into at least 15 languages, including several languages of the Balkans. In the Greek versions from the so-called “Apocalypse of the Theotokos” known from the 11th century, the Virgin Mary’s journey to hell is intended to win mercy for sinners.
  - 20 As Áron Németh (2021: 179) writes in his summary study on biblical emotions (referring to Egger-Wezel & Corley (eds.) 2012): “Fear is the most dominant emotion in the Old Testament.”
  - 21 On the symbolism of the other world, see, for example, Bousset 1901; Patch 1950; Benz 1969: 311–410 (“Die Bilderwelt der Visionen”); Dinzelbacher 1987.



- 22 On the role of the iconography of hell, see, for example Himka 2006; on the role of iconography in general: Heo 2018.
- 23 The continued maintenance of the church and priesthood in relation to the cult of the dead and mortuary beliefs is a general European phenomenon; see, for example, Le Goff 1967; Paxton 1990; Valk 2015.

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# The Purgatory Souls as Interceding Agents Between Earth and Heaven

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**Abstract:** A number of Catholic prayers and rituals are expressly conceived to keep and strengthen the relationship between the living and the dead. One of the most significant beliefs concerns Purgatory, an otherworldly place located between Earth and Heaven devoted to the purgation of those who are not sufficiently pure to ascend directly to Heaven. As such, the Purgatory souls can be seen as the most similar, or else the most sensitive to the living and their uncertain and painful condition. According to the Catholic doctrine, the Purgatory souls, if duly invoked, can intercede with God in favour of the living. On the other hand, prayers and rituals addressed to the faithful departed can shorten their stay in Purgatory. A mutual benefit can thus ensue when the living and the dead keep their connection. I will focus on two specific practices from southern Italy, two different but equally intense and substantial forms of worship of Purgatory souls and of their connection with the living. Firstly, the Neapolitan cult of anime pezzentelle ("mendicant souls"), a phenomenon of popular piety according to which thousands of skulls piled up in the city underground are regarded as the earthly remains of Purgatory souls. Secondly, based on a field-work conducted in my hometown (Castellaneta, Puglia), a ritual prayer known as the *Rosary of 100 Requiem*; it revolves around the *Requiem aeternam*, a short prayer invoking an "eternal rest" for the faithful departed, which is recited a total of a hundred times. A significant case, indeed, of revitalization and reassessment of an old-fashioned practice – the Rosary for the dead – into a collective and monthly ritual performed in a cemetery. After all, these are two emblematic examples of the remarkable place the dead still occupy in the lives of so many people, especially if they are regarded as otherworldly agents of those who pray for them.

**Keywords:** afterlife, dead, intercession, prayer, purgatory, ritual, southern Italy, worship

## INTRODUCTION

The dead, death and afterlife have a prominent and significant place and role both in the Catholic religion and in the lives and minds of individuals and groups which belong, to varying degrees, to the Catholic faith and culture, as emblematically assessed, first and foremost, by the seminal work of Ernesto de Martino (2008). The common purpose of so many Catholic beliefs, prayers, rituals and practices is indeed that of preserving, strengthening, enhancing the relationship between the living and the dead. Through these latter, the connection of the earthly, immanent condition of the faithful can be made closer and deeper to the transcendency of the hereafter. The different status of the dead souls based on their conduct on Earth is also implicit in this relationship. This is exactly what we can infer from both popular religious practices I am going to present in this article. They are based indeed on a strong familiarity and interplay between our condition as mortal and precarious beings, and an afterlife embodied by a peculiar category of the dead: the holy souls in Purgatory. On the one hand, an individual and informal worship of single dead, in form of anonymous skulls, taking place in the underground of Naples since approximately 150 years ago, is currently on the wane because of an ecclesiastical interdiction; on the other hand, a collective and formalized worship of all Purgatory souls is performed as a ritual prayer inside the cemetery of my hometown, Castellaneta (Puglia), starting in 2017; some months later, this became the subject of my field research.

As argued by Jacques Le Goff (1984: 1): “The life of the believer undergoes a change when he becomes convinced that life does not end with death.” This is all the more actual and effective if we think of the so called “third place” of the Catholic hereafter: Purgatory. In spite of having “installed itself firmly in the mind of Western Christendom” not earlier than “between 1150 and 1200 or so” (Le Goff 1984: 4), Purgatory can be seen as one of the most widespread and pervasive dogmas of Catholic doctrine – but one also “too much forgotten by the majority of the faithful”, according to the eminent theologian François X. Schouppe (1893: v). This is perfectly shown by a number of folk customs, sacred pictures, rituals and institutions in southern Italy, which is the specific area of my research (as also studied in a classic and extensive work on the “culture of death”, Lombardi Satriani & Meligrana 1989). Just to mention some significant instances, churches and lay confraternities dedicated to the Purgatory – alternatively renamed as the “Orison and Death” – and to Our Lady of Mount Carmel – traditionally seen as the patron saint of the holy souls in Purgatory – are countless (see Alemanno 1988 and Boaga 1990). Purgatorial iconography is rich and very popular, with a variety of holy cards, devotional booklets, votive *aediculae*, shrines, paintings, statues, etc. Above all, to come to my own subject, prayers, rituals and pious practices devoted to the Purgatory souls are something perhaps marginal, at least compared to other ones belonging to the Catholic tradition, but still quite common for some individuals, families

and groups, who can thus keep a significant link both with their dead and an afterlife not too distant from their earthly experience. The aim of this article is therefore to identify, characterize and emphasize the place, function and meanings Purgatory takes on both as a dogma in the Catholic doctrine – the subject of the first two sections – and as a religious belief in the lives and minds of people who took or take care of a kind of dead they consider(ed) similar to themselves and prone to pay attention to their needs, as will be exemplified, in the last three sections, through the abovementioned instances concerning Naples and Castellaneta.

## PURGATORY IN CATHOLIC DOCTRINE

Basically conceived as an intermediate and intermediary realm spatially and spiritually located between Hell and Heaven,<sup>1</sup> and “between the death of the individual and the Last Judgement” (Le Goff 1984: 6), Purgatory, as “a transitory state”, is literally devoted to the purgation – from the Latin verb *purgare*: to clean, to purify, to release – of those “souls which, at the moment of death, are in the state of grace, but which have not completely expiated their faults, nor attained the degree of purity necessary to enjoy the vision of God” (Schouppe 1893: 4). In other words, as suggested by Jerry L. Walls (2012: 6), the doctrine of Purgatory is based on a “sanctification process”, as if death were not an immediate but a more gradual transition, during which the dead can still work, through their own *post-mortem* suffering, to be made “actually holy”.

As a consequence, Purgatory is also conceived as “a place of punishment”, where dead souls are accordingly “endowed with a materiality *sui generis*”, so as to make clearer and more palpable the process of purgation, which is usually carried out by fire (cf. Le Goff 1984: 7–11) or, more generally, by “the pain of sense” (Schouppe 1893: 30–34). Fire, indeed, is something very common in popular narratives about Purgatory, where souls “are depicted engulfed in real, not symbolic, fire, the evidence of which include burned charcoal-colored handprints on tables for the living to consider” (Pasulka 2015: 6). As can be seen in the figures below (1 and 2), besides being plunged in fire, the Purgatory souls are also portrayed by iconography in search of mercy from Heaven, with their begging eyes and hands addressed to Jesus or the Virgin Mary, who are placed exactly above them.

Purgatory, in fact, is conceived as a place of mercy, empathy and solidarity as well. First of all, it is God himself who “wishes that our fear should be tempered with great trust in His mercy” (Schouppe 1893: 125), not to mention the Virgin Mary, who is doctrinally seen as a source of consolation of the penitent souls (Schouppe 1893: 135–139). On the other hand, since God “gives to His Church [the power] to shorten the duration of their [i.e. Purgatory souls] sufferings”, thus allowing “the intervention of the living [...] to succour our afflicted brethren” (Schouppe 1893: 146), Purgatory turns into a place through

which the living and the dead can be closely and significantly connected, in the first place because “the trial to be endured by the dead may be abridged by the intercessory prayers, the ‘suffrages’, of the living” (Le Goff 1984: 11). The efficacy of the living’s prayers for the dead, along with the existence itself of Purgatory – which was instead firmly rejected by the Protestant Reformation – was solemnly stated by the Council of Trent in the second half of the sixteenth century (for a historical overview of the theological interpretations of Purgatory see Gilardi 2003):

*Whereas the Catholic Church, instructed by the Holy Ghost, has, from the sacred writings and the ancient tradition of the Fathers, taught, in sacred councils, and very recently in this oecumenical Synod, that there is a Purgatory, and that the souls there detained are helped by the suffrages of the faithful, but principally by the acceptable sacrifice of the altar [...]. But let the bishops take care, that the suffrages of the faithful who are living, to wit the sacrifices of masses, prayers, alms, and other works of piety, which have been wont to be performed by the faithful for the other faithful departed, be piously and devoutly performed, in accordance with the institutes of the church [...]*

(The Council of Trent: The Twenty-Fifth Session 1848: 232–233; my emphasis)



**Figure 1.** Holy cards portraying the Purgatory souls in fire begging for mercy from Jesus or the Virgin Mary.

**Photograph:** Vito Carrassi.





**Figure 2.** Sculpture representing the Virgin Mary with two Purgatory souls at her feet, inside a church dedicated to Purgatory (Vico del Gargano, Puglia).

**Photograph:** Vito Carrassi.

In the wake of such a dogmatic and authoritative statement, throughout the seventeenth century “a conception and devotion of the souls in Purgatory as suffering people spreads out”; these souls, on the other hand, were regarded as “involved in the lives of the living both for the practice of the suffrages, and for the symbolic exchange between the living and the dead in the name of *caritas*” (Niola 2022: 38). This topic had already been discussed in the most famous and complete depiction of the Purgatory, namely the homonymous second *cantica* of the poem *Divina Commedia* by Dante Alighieri, regarded by Jacques Le Goff as the “poetic triumph” of the Purgatory (1984: 334–355). In

VI, 1–48, for example, a crowd of souls gather around the poet begging for suffrage prayers from the living, then Dante debates with Vergil about the value of those prayers and their relationship with God's will. Almost three centuries later, in the context of the Counter-Reformation, *pietas* of the living for the dead became a cornerstone of the Catholic pedagogy; therefore the suffrage prayers aimed at helping the Purgatory souls to ascend to Heaven came to be seen as a veritable duty for every faithful (see Pinelli 1603 and 1609). In 1685 Domenico d'Alessandro, a Dominican friar, even wrote that nothing instigates the divine rage more than people neglecting to pray for the Purgatory souls, so much that God punishes them "by his own sword, slaughtering them during lifetime" (quoted in Niola 2022: 35).

As a third place hanging between Earth and Heaven, then between life, death and afterlife, Purgatory also provided the Catholic Church with a means to undermine and assimilate those visions and supernatural beings inherited from the Pagan culture, turning them into Christian dead or Christianised ghosts, thus including them in a religious framework of immortality and eternal deliverance (Niola 2022: 46–47; Delumeau 1978: 136). Eventually, as argued by Michel Vovelle (1996: 111), by dosing punishment and hope, such a third place acted as a powerful social regulator, but also as a way to soothe individual distress and manage the work of grieving, offering a model of peaceful cohabitation between the living and the dead.

## A MIRROR OF THE EARTHLY CONDITION

Despite its transcendent nature and location, Purgatory can be considered in many respects as an afterlife mirroring the human condition. Unlike Hell and Heaven, the other two realms of the Christian hereafter, Purgatory, just like our life on Earth, is something transient and not eternal, an experience with a beginning, a duration, and an end.<sup>2</sup> In a sense, the existence of Purgatory makes possible a temporary continuity between the time of life and the time of death, even subjecting the afterlife to a form of measurement and accounting (Fabre 1987: 20–21). On one hand, Purgatory souls suffer for the penance they endure in order to expiate their sins, yet at the same time they are comforted by the certainty of ascending, one day, to God; on the other hand, living people experience both the fear to be punished for their sins and the hope to be saved for their faith and good works. A liminal and precarious condition comes to the fore, in the balance between current pain and future bliss, for the Purgatory souls, or between Hell and Heaven, everlasting damnation and everlasting happiness, for the people still on Earth.

Therefore, a common condition of suffering and future expectation makes the dead and the living more similar and closer, giving rise inevitably to a bond of solidarity and indulgence between them. The common goal is to gain eternal deliverance, although it is only a question of time for the Purgatory souls, while



it is anything but guaranteed for the living. This makes increasingly central the place of the Purgatory souls in the lives of the Catholic faithful, whose *pietas*, taking care of these “unknown, marginal [...] poor souls, turns them into benevolent and aiding souls”, a sort of minor saints (Niola 2022: 48; cf. Fabre 1987: 25–27).

A consequence of such a deep and functional relationship between the living and the dead is that, on the one hand, the living can influence, at least in terms of duration of the penance, the afterlife condition of the dead, and, on the other hand, the dead, given their intermediate position between Earth and Heaven, can act as mediators for the living with God or, more precisely, with Jesus or his Mother, who, in their turn, act as mediators between them and the Father. This is, indeed, the meaning of the intercession which is ascribed to the prayer<sup>3</sup> and, more particularly, to the suffrage prayers for the holy souls in Purgatory, as stated by Roberto, a profoundly religious 57-year-old man (today 64), member of a lay confraternity who acted as a main informant in the abovementioned research I am conducting in my hometown, Castellaneta: “We pray for them who, in their turn, will pray for us, so as we all gain the resurrection into the glory of Heaven. We are thus glad to create a stronger connection between us and them” (personal communication 2018). In other words, the devotion for the Purgatory souls gives rise to a mutual exchange of intercessions between the living and the dead, then to a mutual form of agency between two different but interconnected stages of the human condition. Accordingly, there is also a mutual exchange of time, in that the living, by praying and acting for the dead, spend some time of their own life to deduct time from the sufferings of the Purgatory souls, while these (are supposed to) spend part of their transcendent time in favour of the living, thus offering them a hope both for their earthly and afterlife time.

As will be shown by the two examples I will present here, the time devoted to the Purgatory souls can be arranged as an individual and more or less extemporaneous initiative – the Neapolitan cult of *anime pezzentelle* – or as a collective act ritually and regularly performed – the *Rosary of 100 Requiem* in Castellaneta. What is common, however, and really essential for understanding the deep meaning of these pious practices is the fact that they are addressed not to familial or known dead, but to the Purgatory souls in general, especially to the abandoned, forgotten, anonymous souls, considered to be “the souls neediest of Your [i.e. God’s] mercy”, to mention a canonical phrase used by the Catholic faithful in the suffrage prayers.

## PURGATORY IN NAPLES

The name itself ascribed to the Purgatory souls in Naples, *anime pezzentelle*, or “mendicant souls”, is indeed a clear sign of their assimilation to the poorest and most marginalised members of the society, that is to those suffering people who need our support and assistance in order to survive in this life; not by

chance, the suffrage prayers for the Purgatory souls were usually matched with the alms for the poor people, who were seen as representatives of the poor of the otherworld (Niola 2022: 35–36).

Another name used to identify the Purgatory souls in Naples, *capuzzelle*, or “little heads”, refers instead to their association to an immense multitude of skulls piled up in the underground of the city. Such an association needs to be clarified, first of all to provide a historical frame for the related cult. As already stated, the worship of the Purgatory souls took hold during the seventeenth century and was triggered by some catastrophic events, such as an epidemic of plague in 1656. This made even more pervasive and disquieting the presence of death in everyday life, as well as the anxiety for the afterlife destiny of so many people who suddenly died and were often deprived of funeral ceremonies, if not deprived of their identities themselves, having been hurriedly buried as anonymous victims of the plague. Other epidemics, such as those of cholera in 1836 and 1884, contributed to an increase of the number of the *capuzzelle* piled up in the city underground, in particular in the hypogea of the churches of Santa Maria delle Anime del Purgatorio ad Arco and San Pietro ad Aram as well as in the so called cemetery of Fontanelle, located under the Sanità, one of the most popular districts of Naples. All these anonymous skulls, just because of their identification as Purgatory souls, have become, for more than 150 years, the recipients of a local and peculiar form of *pietas*, based on that same “sympathetic and contractual mutuality ruling the values” of the Neapolitan community (Niola 2022: 24).

Metonymically interpreted as the dead themselves, some of these skulls have been therefore chosen, in the course of time, by single faithful – often following a revealing dream –<sup>4</sup> in order to take care of them as though were their own relatives. In other words, a specific skull, often provided with a name or a nickname and a more or less touching story – such as that of Lucia, a skull embellished with a bridal veil and a crown, to mark her identity as a bride and princess who died too young, or the so called *capa rossa* (“red head”), “also known as the postman of the souls, because he appears in dreams to bring good news” (Niola 2022: 18) – was adopted by an individual who committed, for a lifetime, to visit regularly and pray for it, but also to adorn its niche with candles, flowers, rosaries and other small objects, so as to frame it in a cemetery setting. More significantly, the skull was regularly cleaned and dampened, even “polished with alcohol and cotton wool” (Ibid.: 17), in order to offer it a physical and symbolic relief and purification from the pains suffered in Purgatory: such a pious act is called in Neapolitan dialect *refrisco*, literally a “refreshment” from the otherworldly fire, something that can be traced back to the early Christian idea of *refrigerium*, referring to a temporary suspension or mitigation of infernal pains (see Grosu 2024). Hence, if a soul is deprived of someone taking care of it, its stay in Purgatory could even be eternal (Pardo 1983: 116).

In the light of the mutuality ruling both the local community and the relationship with the dead, an individual who prayed for and took care of a skull identified as a Purgatory soul expected to be rewarded in some way. Actually, those who adopted a skull were usually individuals in search of a higher source of protection and help for themselves or their relatives. Often expressed in the form of written messages placed next to the skull, the adopters' requests concerned concrete needs such as a recovery, a job, a happy marriage or the numbers to win the lottery: "in other words: safety, stability, continuity", or else all that the Neapolitan people traditionally feel as distant and unreachable (Pardo 1983: 116). As a consequence, here the mutual assistance between the dead and the living takes on a worldly rather than an otherworldly meaning, though always based on a strong sense of empathy and solidarity.

Such a form of popular religion has been nonetheless barely tolerated by the Church, which eventually issued, in 1968, some regulations to put a stop to it (see Niola 2022: 26–27). This kind of worship of the dead was considered superstitious rather than religious, especially for its fetishist attachment to the skulls and the supernatural power ascribed to them; it brought about, indeed, an undue confusion between saints and Purgatory souls – with the latter regarded as definitely closer and more sensitive to the faithful's needs. The main purpose of the ecclesiastical intervention was indeed to emphasize the cemeterial, and not holy, nature of the place, and the adjustment of the cult of the dead to the liturgical norms, starting from the concealment of the bones (D'Andrea 1997: 49). These measures, combined with prohibitions and closures due to safety reasons and restorations, have made it even more difficult to access the hypogea in the recent years, considerably limiting and deterring the worship of the *anime pezzentelle*, but not that sense of proximity and familiarity with the dead still experienced by so many Neapolitan – and, more generally, southern Italian – people. Today the underground setting of this local tradition has undergone a predictable process of heritagisation, turning what was conceived as a threshold between the living and the dead into a museum of popular religiosity, a place of worship into a cultural heritage (Niola 2022: 94).

### THE ROSARY OF 100 REQUIEM

The second case I will examine here comes from my hometown, Castellaneta (Puglia, in the province of Taranto): a traditional Catholic practice expressly devoted to the Purgatory souls that has been revived and given an innovative ritual form.<sup>5</sup> It is known as the *Rosary of 100 Requiem*. Like the canonical Rosary, it consists of the reiterated recitation – 100 times altogether – of a prayer, *Requiem aeternam*, specifically concerning the faithful departed. It was something not unknown in my town, since it had been carried out as a collective act until the 1960s, under the name of *coronella* ("little crown"), every first or second Friday of the month in the oratory of the local cathedral. This was told

to me, during a long semi-structured interview in September 2018, by Egidio, a 75-year-old man – formerly a journalist and theatrical director, recently come back to his hometown – who personally had attended that monthly practice. Its disappearance coincided with that of the organizing of the lay confraternity, the Brothers of the Holy Crucifix, whose establishment dated back to 1648. The *Rosary of 100 Requiem* was exactly recovered following the re-establishment, in November 2016, of such a confraternity. The idea came from Egidio himself (who died in November 2020), who was also the eldest member of the confraternity and the only one among them to be acquainted with the existence of that kind of prayer for the dead. The *Rosary of 100 Requiem*, as an intercession prayer, hence a merciful act for the Purgatory souls, was warmly embraced by all the other Brothers, who were looking for something to put in practice their own mission – an imitation of Jesus crucified by doing works of mercy. It was nonetheless given a new form and setting, under the creative and passionate guidance of Egidio, who wanted to make an old religious custom a more significant and engaging experience for its participants.

After being officially approved by the local bishop, the *Rosary of 100 Requiem* took place for the first time in March 2017 as a ritual procession in the cemetery; it was performed by almost all the Brothers together with some common faithful summoned by them directly or by the posters appended in the churches and along the town's streets. In order to carry out my field research, I have attended such a religious event, as an observing participant, almost every month from December 2017 to August 2022, when I moved from Castellana to Vieste, more than 200 kilometres away. I have nonetheless continued to be informed and updated about it both by the reports of my main informant Roberto, and through the Whatsapp chat of the confraternity, in which I had been included since its opening. Roberto being the prior of the confraternity, and the most engaged Brother in organizing and disseminating the *Rosary of 100 Requiem*, I conducted two extensive interviews with him, the first one in September 2018, along with Egidio and Antonella (a 43-year-old woman, at the time the last person to have joined the confraternity), the second one almost three years later, in July 2021. Shorter interviews and informal talks have been conducted, just before and after the performing of the ritual, with some common participants. Furthermore, I took a number of photographs to capture the setting, the actors and the different moments of the procession, and I filmed the entire performance during my first participation, in December 2017.

The *Rosary of 100 Requiem* was structured as a *Via Crucis*, namely as a walking itinerary consisting of ten stations – instead of the fourteen making up the *Via Crucis* carried out during the Holy Week – each of them commemorating, by an appropriate reading, an episode of the Passion and Death of Jesus Christ.<sup>6</sup> Between one station and the next one, then during the walking phase of the ritual, the participants recited ten *Requiem aeternam*, so as to reach a total of a hundred at the end of the route. The procession covered the cemetery in most

of its extension, starting and finishing in front of a little church located within the cemetery near its main entrance. The Brothers of the Holy Crucifix, wearing their traditional clothing (a white surplice and a red *mozzetta* – a sort of cloak), walked ahead of the procession, one of them carrying a huge cross (see Figure 3). At the beginning and at the end of the ritual the canonical Catholic prayers – *Pater*, *Ave* and *Gloria* – were recited, along with some specific supplications devoted to the Purgatory souls.



**Figure 3.** The Brothers of the Holy Crucifix in procession, the first of them carrying a huge cross.

Photograph: Elettra Carrassi.

Little leaflets of four pages, containing the texts to be read along the itinerary, were preliminarily delivered every time by the Brothers to the participants (see Figure 4). What is written in these leaflets is essential to understanding the meaning of the ritual, because for each station there is a short description of a moment of *Passio Christi* framed within pious formulae begging for mercy both for the Purgatory souls and those who are now praying for them. What arises from this religious practice is therefore an exchange of (wished) agencies between the dead souls suffering in Purgatory and some living people

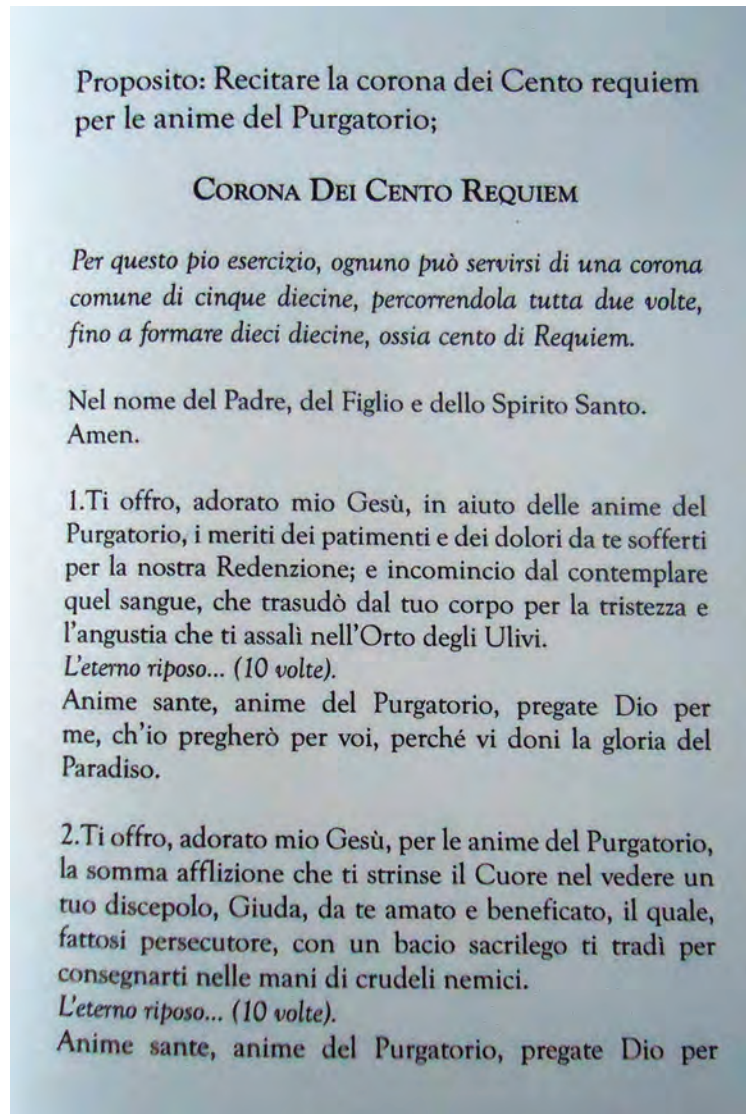


purposefully gathered in a cemetery to take care of them. Significantly, such an exchange is mediated by the redemptive agency granted by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ – and his Mother, whose sorrow for the Son’s death is seen as closely related to that of Jesus. In fact, the participants in the *Rosary of 100 Requiem* offer to the Lord God, on behalf of the Purgatory souls, the redeeming pains suffered by Jesus Christ on the Earth. As a consequence, they ask the dead holy souls to intercede with God on behalf of themselves. The pious formula concluding each station is explicit in that sense: “Holy souls, souls of Purgatory, pray God for me, because I shall pray for you, so that He gives you the glory of Heaven.” On the other hand, this was the specific aim pursued by the confraternity, also by virtue of its intermediary position between the laypeople and the sacred things. As a privileged channel connecting Earth and Heaven, the Brothers can act, through their special link with Jesus as our saviour, as mediators between the needs of the common faithful and those of the Purgatory souls. And this function can be conveniently fulfilled by means of a ritual and collective prayer such as the *Rosary of 100 Requiem*, all the more so if turned into an open, public and processional practice carried out in a cemetery every first Sunday of the month. As emphasized by Roberto during our second interview, praying “collectively, as a community” is something better than praying individually, “especially in such a critical juncture for the Catholicism” (personal communication 2021). The confraternity has thus given a more solemn and engaging form both to a religious practice formerly performed in closed spaces, and to the informal tradition of walking through the cemetery for visiting and praying for our own dearly departed. Actually, as claimed by one of the most regular participants, Andrea, a 67-year-old butcher, “reciting a Rosary for the dead is more appropriate and effective than celebrating a requiem mass”; his wife Maria Luigia (61), on the other hand, justified her participation as a way “to feel closer my own dead, in particular my mother, recently died” (personal communication 2021).

Even more importantly, while the worship of the dead is traditionally circumscribed within a limited period of the year – the first two days of November, framed between the *Novena* (i.e. nine days: 24 October–1 November) and the *Ottavario* (i.e. eight days: 2–9 November) – the monthly recurrence of the *Rosary of 100 Requiem* allows the faithful to extend their care of the dead to the whole year. Accordingly, at least for the participants in this ritual prayer, whose number has remained significantly stable since 2017 until today, religious values such as *pietas* and *caritas* for the dead, which are perceived as something distant and outdated even by most believers – as frankly maintained by Roberto, Egidio and Antonella during my interview – are revived and updated. Actually, all the common faithful I have talked with during my fieldwork have constantly claimed and demonstrated a genuine care and respect for the mystery of death, as well as a firm belief in the existence of the Purgatory and in the effectiveness of their prayers for the dead holy souls. For instance, Isa, a 59-year-old



woman, explained her assiduous participation in the *Rosary of 100 Requiem* as a means “to let ascend our dearly departed to Heaven” (personal communication 2021). Something similar can be said about the Neapolitan adopters of the *anime pezzentelle*, who made the presence of the dead in their lives an ordinary, and not an extra-ordinary, thing, thanks to their recurring visits to the adopted skulls and the continuous dialogue with them. In other words, a space expressly devoted to the dead and death, such as a cemetery – outdoor or underground – is made by its most frequent visitors into a perfect setting to turn what is today generally lived as an *exception*, i.e. the concern for the dead, into a *routine*.



**Figure 4.** The leaflet delivered to the participants to the *Rosary of 100 Requiem*.

Photograph: Vito Carrassi.

## CONCLUSION

To come to a comprehensive understanding of the subject so far examined, namely the mutual agency of the dead and the living through the religious medium of Purgatory, let me give a comparison of the two cases considered. What is common in both practices is the idea of Purgatory as a liminal and intermediate place between Earth and Heaven, therefore a place connecting life and death in the context of an afterlife; a temporary condition, which makes the transition itself from life to death something slower and more manageable. Consequently, the inhabitants of such a place, the Purgatory souls, are seen as possible mediators between the living and God, thus providing a privileged channel of communication between “down here” and “up there”. This means that, through suitable prayers and practices, one can achieve divine mercy and/or supernatural help. The setting of such an exchange between the living and the dead, as we have seen, can be both an informal cemetery, such as the underground, hidden, almost clandestine space indiscriminately gathering anonymous dead in the form of skulls in Naples, and a veritable cemetery, that is an open, ordered, public space gathering nameable dead enshrined in individual tombs, as is the case of Castellaneta. While the cult of the *anime pezzentelle* was carried out directly by individuals, perhaps supported by their relatives and continued by their descendants, in the *Rosary of 100 Requiem* the actors are a more or less established group of faithful led by a lay confraternity (a minimum of 12 to a maximum of 33 people have attended the monthly events so far). As a consequence, in the former case we have a spontaneous and informal individual worship devoted to a single dead person, less and less tolerated by the Church; in the latter case there is an ecclesiastically approved form of popular piety devoted to all the Purgatory souls, rearranged and revitalised by a lay confraternity.

Nonetheless, in both cases what is staged is a (wished-for) exchange of agencies between the living and the “anonymous and immense crowd of suffering spirits” (Niola 2022: 23–24) inhabiting, according to the Catholic doctrine, Purgatory, interpreted at the same time as a sort of temporary Hell, and as “a purifying collective place, known and close, where one can atone for their sins and achieve the release from them thanks to the suffrages and the pity of the living” (Pardo 1983: 117). To spend time and take care of unknown dead belonging to a more or less distant past, such as the skulls interpreted as *anime pezzentelle* in Naples, as well as to join a confraternity devoted to the Purgatory souls and/or to get involved in the *Rosary of 100 Requiem* may be seen as an understandable choice for individuals sincerely and intensely attached to the sacredness of the death, the faith in the afterlife and the values of mercy, empathy and mutual assistance. As stated, with a little emotion, by my informant Maria Luigia: “Yes, I believe in the afterlife [...]. I believe that there is another life, because otherwise, I don’t know, I would become disheartened.

My mother, for instance, has suffered, so, after this suffering, I think she is now enjoying in Heaven. I pray so that she is well” (personal communication 2021). According to Roberto, on the other hand, in confirmation of what he had told me three years earlier (see above), “worship of the dead must be always fostered, also because our prayers release many souls from Purgatory; once in Heaven, they can pray and intercede for us” (personal communication 2021). In other words, those who pursue such a regular and confident interaction with the Purgatory souls are people in search of something providing their life with a higher and deeper sense as well as a hope for a better future, both on Earth and in the afterlife.

## NOTES

- 1 Regarding the vexed question of the material and/or spiritual nature of the Purgatory see Pasulka (2015: 4–5): “From the twelfth century to the present, representations in various sources, including medieval chronicles, *exempla*, early modern periodicals, and, later, in pamphlets, books, and magazines, and today on websites and in books, have depicted purgatory variously as a location on earth, a place simultaneously spiritual and physical, and, most recently, as a more abstract condition of souls experiencing the pain of loss.”
- 2 In an ethnographic study on how death is experienced in a district of Naples, Italo Pardo (1983: 117) argues that “both hell and heaven are permanent, radical conditions. Negations – in a sense or in another – of the actual precariousness of existence which makes so peculiar and dramatic to live in these areas. In the traditional idea of the afterlife [...] one can therefore recognize the projection of the existential condition of these people, but above all their deep need of an immediate relationship with the sacred [...] which give a hope for an intercession in the earthly life.”
- 3 According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1999: 561): “Intercession is a prayer of petition which leads us to pray as Jesus did. He is the one intercessor with the Father on behalf of men, especially sinners.”
- 4 As pointed out by Marino Niola (2022: 51–52; see also 17): “The dead soul reveals itself in a dream to the faithful by making itself recognized and indicating its own place. In the cemetery of Fontanelle [...] the faithful dreamt of the skull and the spot of the cemetery where it was. In San Pietro ad Aram, instead, only after the beginning of the worship does the dead soul appear in a dream and speak to the faithful who, thanks to that indication, can give it a name.”
- 5 I have presented my research on this subject in two conferences: at the “City Rituals: 13th International Conference of SIEF’s Ritual Year Working Group” (Bucharest, 7–9 November 2018), with the title “The Resurrecturis: Reviving an old ritual (and a traditional belief) in the public space of a cemetery”, and at the 16th SIEF Congress “Living Uncertainty” (Brno, 7–10 June 2023), with the title “Praying for the Dead during the Last Five Years”. See Carrassi 2024.
- 6 I use the past tense because, after the break imposed by the pandemic between 2020 and early 2021, during which the ritual has been performed in a virtual form via Whatsapp, since May 2021 the *Rosary of 100 Requiem* has lost its processional form, turning into a collective but static prayer recited, depending on the weather, inside or outside the cemetery church.

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# Individual Views and Global Trends: The Conceptualisation of the Dead. A Case Study

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**Abstract:** Death is subject to cultural representations; in every culture, there are various traditions, discourses or scripts that help people come to terms with death, dying and what comes next. Individual views, however, never fully accord with cultural frameworks; they are fragmented and full of uncertainties, inconsistencies and contradictions. Therefore, contextual analysis of individual cases would give us a better understanding of how the various frameworks – and other factors – influence individual conceptualisations and attitudes towards the dead and ultimately lead to a more subtle view of the influence the dead have in contemporary society.

Applying the vernacular religious approach, this paper looks closely into the views of and attitude toward the dead of one person, and, through his example, addresses broader questions regarding the formation of individual views and the dead's role in contemporary society.

**Keywords:** individual conceptualisations, afterlife, relationship with the dead, Hungary

## INTRODUCTION

I first met János, a Hungarian man in his late sixties, during a short field trip with students in rural south-west Hungary. When we interviewed him on local religious practices, it became immediately clear that the dead greatly influenced his life. He told us, for example, that he always walked to church “in memory



of my father”, and that in addition to the graves of his closest relatives, he also tended around 70 other graves in the local cemetery, graves of more distant relatives, friends, or people he respected. My impression was confirmed during a series of interviews when he talked about his attachment to his late parents, his regular weekly visits to their grave(s) to have a chat with them and the support they gave him in times of hardship. Yet, when I asked him about the after-life and the otherworld, his answers became rather vague, and he rejected any possibility of communication with the dead or that the dead could return, give signs or make their presence felt. I found the seeming contradiction between his lack of personal encounters with the dead and their prominence in his life intriguing. This paper aims to look more closely into his conceptualisation of and attitude toward the dead and, through his example, addresses broader questions regarding the formation of individual views and the dead’s role in contemporary society.<sup>1</sup>

Death is subject to cultural representations (Hertz 2006 [1907, 1960]); in every culture, there are various traditions, discourses or scripts that help people come to terms with death, dying and what comes next. In his comparative study, using Erving Goffman’s framework theory, Tony Walter (2018) identified six frameworks – ways in which the relationship between the living and the dead is interpreted – which he found most representative across space and time: the dangerous dead, ancestors, monotheistic religions, Buddhism, secular memory and romantic love. The first promotes the cessation of any connection with the dead for the sake of both the dead and the living. In the second, the dead continue their existence as ancestors, a powerful group engaged in a reciprocal relationship with the living, where the living must earn the goodwill and support of the dead by offering various gifts. In the third, the dead survive death as immortal souls, keep their personal identity, and – at least in some religions – rely on the intercession of the living for their well-being. In Buddhism, the dead exist without personal identity. In the fifth framework, which had its roots in Protestantism, the dead only live on in the memory of the living, while the sixth focuses on the survival of the emotional bonds with the dead, who continue to exist either as memories “in the heart of the living” or as spiritual beings (Walter 2018: 43–49). Walter assumed there is a chronological order between these frameworks, with the first two being the oldest and the last the most recent, but he also noted that they may coexist and produce syncretistic forms even though some of them, like ancestor worship and monotheistic religions, promote competing ideas. Based on how they relate to the dead, Walter also makes a distinction between ‘care cultures’, cultures that emphasise the importance of caring for the dead, and ‘memory cultures’, which focus on keeping the memory of the dead alive (Walter 2018: 51; Walter 2017: 26–27).

Taking a diachronic approach, Walter identified certain trends that are characteristic of how people relate to their dead in contemporary Western societies.



After a long period of dominance of the secular memory framework, the dead seem to have returned to the living, however, primarily not as entities to be cared for, but as ones who care for the living by supporting and protecting them in various ways. At the same time, bonds with the dead have become affection-based instead of being informed by socially prescribed obligations, and people enjoy greater freedom in choosing how and with which dead they want to maintain a relationship (Walter 2018: 50; see also: Klass 2015: 106).

While seeing the ‘big picture’ is very useful, dealings with the dead in reality are more diverse and nuanced – as Walter also implies (Walter 2018: 53). Individual views never fully accord with cultural frameworks; they are fragmented and full of uncertainties, inconsistencies and contradictions (cf. Bennett 1999; Day 2012; Davies 1997; Astuti 2007: 234–235; Knuuttila 2001: 21; Hesz 2020; Valk 2022: 9–10).<sup>2</sup> Therefore, contextual analysis of individual cases would give us a better understanding of how the various frameworks – and other factors – influence individual conceptualisations and attitudes towards the dead and ultimately lead to a more subtle view of the influence the dead have in contemporary society.

My analysis follows the vernacular religious approach first established by Leonard Primiano (Primiano 1995, 2012) and developed by several others (see Bowman 2003, 2004a, 2004b; Bowman & Valk 2012). This approach focuses on the individual and argues that instead of being passive recipients of doctrinal teaching, people actively and constantly shape their religious practices and ideas by negotiating them with others. In the case of conceptualisations about and attitudes towards the dead, these others may be family members, neighbours, peers, religious actors or institutions, secular authorities (school, state), and the media.

This paper is based on three semi-structured interviews with János, altogether lasting seven hours, that were recorded over a period of several months. I also conducted an intensive, three-week-long stint of fieldwork in his village in June 2024, when I interviewed thirty people on their relationship with the dead. I used the headquarters of a local cultural association as my base and participated in community events whenever I could.<sup>3</sup>

In the first section, I introduce János and his village and continue by presenting his ideas about the afterlife and relationships with the dead. Then, I compare his case to the local ideas and the global trends described in the international scholarly literature in order to underscore its particularities.

## JÁNOS AND THE DEAD

Apart from a few years when he lived in the nearby small town, János has spent most of his life in his birth village. The settlement, now measuring about 1400 inhabitants, gained regional importance as a railroad junction at the end of the 19th century. By the first half of the 20th century, it was a small regional centre

where people living and working as landless peasants in the surrounding agricultural estates attended church services and sent their children to school. Later, under socialism, many of them moved into the village. While most of the villagers lived off the land before WWII and were employed on a local state farm or one of the nearby collective farms during the socialist era, the number of people working in other sectors grew steadily. However, since the 1970s, but increasingly after the regime change in 1989 and the subsequent loss of job opportunities, the number of inhabitants has declined significantly. As a result, the village has lost more than a third of its population compared to its heyday in the late 1960s.

Denominationally, the settlement has been mixed ever since the second half of the 16th century, with Protestants – mostly Calvinists – outnumbering Catholics until the early 1800s. Calvinist families, however, remained socially more influential even in the minority, as they tended to be more well-off than their Catholic neighbours. The relationship between the two denominations was not without tension; Calvinists often accused Catholics of ‘soul-fishing’ (Simonné Pallós 2024: 45), a term used for attempts at conversion, and according to my interlocutors, interdenominational marriages were frowned upon until the 1950s–1960s. However, as religiosity declined and ecumenism was increasingly encouraged by both churches, religious affiliation became less important, and even though people still know who is a Catholic and who is a Calvinist, it no longer informs their relationships.

János was born in the 1950s as the fourth child of one of the oldest Catholic families in the village. As the youngest son, he stayed in the family home with his parents and still lives in the house built by his paternal grandfather. He trained as a skilled labourer and held various blue-collar jobs before retiring. His forties and fifties were marked by personal and financial struggles, and he had a serious health crisis 15 years ago, hovering between life and death for several days. He is a kind, intelligent, sensitive and sociable person who is actively involved in community life and is a popular and well-respected member of the village community.

### Conceptualisations

János identifies as a religious person, and he is one of the few local Catholics who regularly attend Sunday mass.<sup>4</sup> Like most of his contemporaries growing up in the 1960s, he received a religious upbringing, attended catechism classes, received Confirmation and even served as an altar boy. During the summers, his parents often sent him to spend time with his uncle, a practising priest, so that “he would learn one thing or another”. He stopped attending mass regularly as an adult because of being too busy with life, but always “kept” his religion, as “it never taught us evil”. He became a practising Catholic again in the wake of his illness fifteen years ago, after his doctor told him he should be grateful to God, not him, for being alive.

It may be surprising, then, that when asked about the afterlife, he often disputed or outright rejected key tenets of Catholic eschatology. For example, he repeatedly denied the reality of resurrection, deeming it unrealistic, and called those who believed in it “bigots”:

*Well... even right now, there are more than seven billion people on Earth. Now, I don't even know how to count this, that is, from when should we count, going back two thousand years, or what, this resurrection... the planet would be unliveable! It would be chaotic, so chaotic that I think some people would break down or even drop dead because they could not comprehend all the changes. Only if you think about how much the world has developed since the death of my parents 34 years ago, I'm not sure if they could make sense of it.*

Some of his other statements also suggest that he considered death the end of one's existence. When I asked him about the whereabouts of his parents, he replied that they lived on in his soul, and, on another occasion, claimed that we have only this life on Earth and that “one should try to live so that it is acceptable and pleasant and good for oneself and for others and try to make a legacy if one can. Be a good human while you are here.” Yet, on other occasions, he would talk about the souls ‘flying up there’ and often pointed to the sky when talking about his parents. But exactly what ‘up there’ meant was somewhat vague and only partially complied with church teachings:

AH: *What happens to our soul after death?*

J: *Well I...it, it, I think it flies up there.*

AH: *But where?*

J: *Well, to God? I don't know. Father, Son, Holy Spirit, that is, well, I don't know, maybe the souls gather by the Holy Spirit?*

AH: *And does everybody fly up there?*

J: *Well, um, I don't know what sins one must commit that..., and if a judge, who weighs [judges] people, and sends them here or there truly exists...? We used to joke that “I don't want to go to heaven because none of my friends are there” [laughs] because, according to people's conception, only the really good souls go there. But who is the judge there who decides which soul is good and worthy of it? That really makes me wonder.*

AH: *And where do the others go?*

J: *Well, to Purgatory?*

AH: *Aha...*

J: *But some might be so bad they would even extinguish the fire there...[laughs] Well, these things...*

AH: *And what happens to the souls in Purgatory?*

J: *Well, I don't know where those souls go. Or all souls fly up, and then the selection is made there? And what do you think?*

As the excerpt shows, János is roughly familiar with the Catholic teachings about damnation and salvation but is rather reluctant to accept the idea of punishment and the authority of anyone – human or divine – to judge who is worthy of redemption and whose sins – or what kind of sins – would exclude someone from the eternal company of God.<sup>5</sup> According to the doctrine of Purgatory, the souls of people who only committed venial sins or confessed their mortal sins and were absolved but could not fully atone them are cleansed from their sins by suffering the torments of the purgatorial fire. Whether one enters heaven, suffers eternal damnation or goes to Purgatory is judged in the Particular Judgement immediately following death. The living may intercede on behalf of the souls in Purgatory and shorten their sufferings by performing various ritualised acts prescribed by the church: praying, fasting, paying for masses, or giving alms. In return, souls freed from the cleansing fire pray for the living. This system of dependence and reciprocity defines the framework for the relationship between the living and the dead, while the rites of intercession provide tools for maintaining and managing this relationship.

Purgatory was the only realm of the Catholic otherworld that János ever mentioned by name during our conversations – and that only once – although he regularly prays for his parents and had paid for masses for them annually in the first ten years after their death and less frequently since then. However, he only vaguely connected this with spiritual assistance for the dead and saw it rather as a way of remembering or paying them due respect.<sup>6</sup>

AH: *Why do you have to have masses for the dead?*

J: *To make them rest in peace, perhaps? I don't know...*

Or:

AH: *Why do people pay for anniversary masses for the dead?*

J: *Well, out of respect... out of respect for the ancestors.*

The only context in which he hinted that the dead might need spiritual help in the afterlife was when talking about local burial customs. In response to the question of whether it was customary to put something in the coffin, he mentioned that he had placed a small image of the Virgin Mary next to his mother, which he had given her as a present from a popular pilgrimage site because he thought “*it should then look after her*”.<sup>7</sup>

János also rather consistently denied the possibility of the dead returning or communicating with the living, and in this, he complied with the official

church doctrine. However, the idea that one could encounter the dead is present in his local community. While there's not much trace in the village of the otherwise rich Hungarian narrative tradition of the returning dead,<sup>8</sup> half of my interlocutors reported personal experiences with deceased people, mainly close relatives. These encounters followed the patterns familiar from folklore narratives: they heard noises or the voices of the dead, felt the presence of their deceased loved ones, saw figures of light, the objects around them behaved uncannily, or the dead appeared to them in person or in a dream.<sup>9</sup> Most of them shared these experiences with close kin or friends but shied away from talking about them with others for fear of being discredited or ridiculed (see also Raahauge 2016: 96; Hayes & Steffen 2018: 168). Some people in János's closest circle had had such experiences and told János about them. One was his sister, who heard strange noises in the house after her husband passed away and understood it as a sign of his presence:

*J: My sister says that for a long time [after her husband died] she heard someone, someone and that it must have been her husband returning, my brother-in-law, and she told me that he was there during the night, "because I heard him" she said... [shakes his head]  
AH: And?*

*J: I asked her "Are you sure it was him?" [She said] "It was him, it was him, it could be no one else, for sure"...Then I told her okay...so as not to contradict her. Well... I respect her enough not to contradict her, but I don't know, I don't believe in this. God knows...*

He sounded somewhat less dismissive of his sister's claim that she heard a knocking sound when her husband's soul departed at the moment of his death – "Well, maybe. What can I say to that? Maybe. I don't know" – but he usually attributed such experiences to fantasy because these accounts, for him, lacked "hard evidence". His experiences while in a coma during his illness only fuelled his uncertainty about the matters of the afterlife. He considered this state to be "halfway to the otherworld" and thought it should have been an opportunity to see what was on the other side.<sup>10</sup> But his visions were incoherent, a 'gibberish' he could not make sense of at all. At the same time, although he was uncertain about the nature of post-death existence and was sceptical toward religious or vernacular imaginations of the otherworld, he hoped that people would be united with their loved ones after death, and he talked about the dead as existing entities, some of whom may, sometimes, have impact on one's life.<sup>11</sup>

## Relationship with the Dead

When talking about János's relationship with the dead, we need to make a distinction between his relations with his late parents and his connections to other dead people. His relationship with his parents fits the continuing bonds model described in bereavement studies (Klass & Silverman & Nickman 1996; Klass & Steffen 2018). He stayed in the family home and was living there with his young family when his parents died a few months apart, both after long illnesses. Although it was foreseeable, their passing was a great emotional shock, and "even though it was 34 years ago, [his grief] is not going away". His strong attachment to them was palpable during our conversations; he talked about them with the utmost respect and love, and often became emotional when mentioning them. He frequently visits their grave, preferably alone, because "then nothing diverts my thoughts, and I can really be together with them". This includes telling them about the ups and downs of his everyday life. He considers his parents his greatest source of emotional support, to whom he can turn for relief; they are his "psychologists", as he once told me. For example, he often mentioned his struggles when renovating the house he inherited from his parents, an undertaking he was forced to jump into without any money, due to the house's poor state:

*Well, we ran out of everything many times. We ran out of money, ran out of hope, of stamina, and were desperate, and there were times that I visited [his parents' grave] during the night. I couldn't sleep, my mind was racing: how would it be, where and how would I get the money? One can get very desperate, so I went there, and it always calmed me down. [...] I don't know how many times I went there, and it always soothed me and gave me strength.*

And the dead not only helped him by lending an ear in times of trouble. Despite never having a direct encounter with his dead parents and doubting the ability of the dead to return or give any signs, he is convinced that his parents have been actively helping him from beyond the grave:

AH: *Do you think that the dead can communicate with us, or they can send us messages [in dreams]. That it somehow comes from them?*

J: *Well [stays silent for a while], if you do something dangerous, but it turns out fine instead of being a disaster, then they [the dead] must have had a hand in it.*

AH: *Can you tell me an example? Did this happen to you?*

J: *Well, when I was rebuilding the house...I don't know what would have happened had they not helped me. Because spiritual support often means a lot more than financial support. Because if your*



*mindset is not right, for example, if you are ill, doctors could do whatever they can and would still be powerless. If the patient doesn't have a positive mindset.*

AH: *How did they help you spiritually?*

J: *Well, they must have looked after me.*

They were also there for him during the time he was ill: “Well, I think, when I was ill, they were surely by my side”; in another conversation, he said they looked after him because “they must have thought I still had work to do”. Their positive influence also manifests when he unwittingly succeeds in something or something turns out better than expected: a job, a family gathering or a surprise meeting with someone; it is because “there must have been an impulse”, “perhaps they somehow guide us from above” or “perhaps they wanted it to happen”. So even if their presence is not overtly experienced in a physical sense, his parents have a positive influence on his life; they act as emotional supporters, help him achieve something and protect him from harm.

János's relationship with the other dead lacks the qualities usually attributed to continuing bonds; it is emotionally less intense and affective, and he never talked about these dead having an impact on his life as his parents have. Nevertheless, it is a relationship that says a lot about his values and personal and social relations.

During his weekly visits to his parents' grave, he usually walks around the cemetery and checks on others as well: more distant relatives, classmates, friends and members of his parents' generation he knew and was fond of or respected. To some, he also brings candles or flowers on All Souls Day.<sup>12</sup> He estimates that he tends up to 70 graves in the local cemetery that either belong to people to whom he was personally attached, or whose descendants left the village or did not have descendants at all. The level of care varies: he provides flowers and maintains the tombstones of the family dead (grandparents, great-uncles and aunts), or, when needed, cleans the headstones of one of his classmates whose relatives live far away. But in most cases, he only treats the surroundings of the graves with weed killers 3–4 times a year, which is nevertheless an important contribution, since according to local aesthetics, the area around a well-kept grave needs to be weedless and raked. He does this on his own initiative and free of charge, out of loyalty, gratitude or reverence. While his attachment to these dead is different from his bonds with his parents in terms of emotionality, intensity and importance, some features are common to both.

Although János does not share certain fundamental official and vernacular religious conceptualisations about the dead, his relationship with them bears some traits of these traditions. One is his strong sense of reciprocity towards the dead. Reciprocity and exchange are at the heart of the Catholic idea of Purgatory, with the living and the dead mutually praying for each other. But in

addition to this spiritual and symmetrical exchange relationship as motivation for the living to intercede for the souls in Purgatory, from the Middle Ages on, there was another, asymmetrical one where the living were obliged to do so in return for their lives, family names, social standing, inheritance or donations (Geary 1994: 77–94; Schmitt 1998: 33; Oexle 1983: 29). One of the earliest pieces of evidence for this are the instructions left to her son by a 9th-century Frankish noblewoman, Dhuoda, where she provided him with a list of people he had to pray for, and also warned him that the amount of prayer should correspond to the amount of inheritance they had bequeathed to his family (Duby 2000: 108–111). Walter considers this an example of syncretism between a monotheistic religion and an existing system of ancestor worship (Walter 2018: 46; and 2017).<sup>13</sup> If so, the doctrine of Purgatory provided the perfect framework for managing exchange relations between the living and the dead. In turn, this exchange became a significant driving force behind Purgatory-related practices. While mostly associated with religiosity in the Middle Ages, inheritance-based reciprocity remained the backbone of relations between the living and the dead in some vernacular or local Catholic traditions up to the end of the 20th century or even later (Douglass 1969: 133–134; Cátedra 1992: 247–254; Goldey 1983: 14).<sup>14</sup> In the early 2000's, inhabitants of a Catholic Hungarian village community in Transylvania talked about being indebted to their forefathers for the land and houses they had inherited, but especially to their parents for directly passing down property and for raising them. Therefore, they regularly prayed, paid for masses and gave alms – small charitable gifts – for their salvation. They also interceded for those from whom they had received significant help in the past or whose former possessions they were using. The assistance they gave to the dead was proportionate to what they had received from them: a family regularly paid for masses to be recited for an uncle who had lent them money when they were building their home, and a woman also paid for masses for a late neighbour whose oven she used for baking bread, while a man only prayed for a friend whose prayer book he had 'inherited'. Whenever the dead felt that the living were not living up to their obligations, they would remind them through dreams or punish them by causing them harm: illness, economic hardship and lack of good fortune (Hesz 2012b: 182–199).

János echoed similar ideas when he said he felt obliged to care for his parents' graves because they "felt that it was their duty to raise us and make us men. So that's the minimum [we can do for them]". Inheritance was also a factor. When passing by an abandoned grave he spoke critically about people who failed to care for the graves of those from whom they inherited something:

*J: Here is my godfather, and my neighbour from the opposite side of the street [is in the other grave], well, they don't have any descendants left, they only had heirs. But it was only the property [that mattered to the heirs].*

AH: Aha.

J: *Only the property and nothing else...*

AH: *Heirs should... [care for the graves]?*

J: *They ought to, ought to. There's one such, well we passed it [a grave], and there's just a small pile left, hardly anything to see. His case was the same; he left his house, car, a great deal of money, and now he does not even have a cross on his grave.*

Reciprocity is also present in his relationship with some of the other dead. For example, whenever he travels to a nearby town, he visits the grave of a fellow patient he met during the time he was ill. As he said, he “couldn’t avoid his grave” because this man had convinced him to spend time in a rehabilitation centre and had paid the costs of his stay. He also tends the graves of two butchers whose tools he uses – he did not get those as gifts since he bought them from their descendants for a small sum, but he used the word “inherit” when he mentioned them.

There are differences, of course, compared to the medieval or Transylvanian examples. Firstly, instead of providing spiritual aid, he makes restitution for his debts to the dead by paying them due respect and keeping their memory: “we respect them, and I think this is the maximum we can do for them. But they have earned it.” And this respect is most visibly manifested through visiting and maintaining graves. Secondly, the dead would not punish the living if they failed to fulfil their obligations. Tending the graves was, rather, an internalised moral obligation reinforced by social norms and community expectations. Most people I spoke with paid regular visits to the cemetery, kept their relatives’ graves tidy and ensured the flowers were fresh. Many told me they have a flower garden specifically to provide them with flowers for the cemetery. Neglected graves are talked about and frowned upon, and while some people find this social expectation somewhat unpleasant, they try to live up to it nevertheless.

János was the only person amongst my interlocutors who explicitly mentioned reciprocity as a factor in his relationship with the dead and linked the obligation of caring for graves to inheritance or the various kinds of support one received from the dead while they were alive. Reciprocity – the principle that one should always return any assistance given – is a central element of his morality, a principle that guides all his social relationships. As a person with many skills, he often helps others with their chores for free because he knows they will pay him back for his services in one way or another. Mutual help and work exchange permeated local interactions in the past: houses were built in *kaláka*, an informal system of labour exchange widespread in Hungarian rural communities, and people commonly helped each other on a reciprocal basis during harvest times or other major agricultural work. Maintaining a support network based on reciprocity was so important that there are local anecdotes

about people who were barely on speaking terms but still went to help each other during threshing. In contrast, as János complained, today, people prefer money to favours returned, although “there are still some who can see beyond their nose”. He correlates the decline of mutual help and reciprocity as a common value with the growing individualisation and atomisation of the community, which he deeply condemns. By sticking to reciprocity in his relationship with the dead, he emphasises its importance as a moral value.

Another common trait János’s relationship with the dead shares with religious and folklore tradition is the normative influence the dead have on him. Narratives produced and distributed by the Catholic clergy (see Schmitt 1998; Finucane 1996: 55), and a rich tradition of folklore texts, along with more recent ethnographic research (Mencej 2025; Hesz 2012a and b), show that the dead had normative power over the living: they controlled the proper execution of funeral rites, deterred the living from committing sins by revealing their otherworldly punishment, exposed those who committed crimes against them, or punished transgressions of moral and social norms by haunting the living. While nothing of this sort would be possible in János’s reality, his parents are still a normative force in his life and influence his behaviour. For example, they are the main reason why he has maintained an amicable relationship with his siblings:

*J: And I couldn't be angry with my siblings. I think everybody has reasons to, for sure, at least once, that [the siblings] did something they shouldn't have done, that wasn't nice. They did. They did. But I couldn't be angry with them, couldn't be.*

*AH: Why can't you be angry with your siblings?*

*J: Well, it would hurt them [nods toward his parents' grave] ...*

He also still tries to live up to his parents’ expectations. When visiting their graves, he regularly tells them about his children’s achievements – “I always boast about the success of my children. Because they [his parents] would be so proud...”, and he also finds fulfilment in doing something that would please his parents:

*J: Whenever I finish mowing or cleaning up the garden, I always remember that my father used to say that he wanted to [be able to] look back from the grave to see if the house was overgrown by the weeds. And then it makes me extra happy, extra happy that, well, he may be proud of me.*

*AH: Why did he say this, did he think that no one would look after the house properly?*

*J: Yes, because they were always very keen on keeping everything just so. So that people could see that the house is looked after.*

In the continuing bonds model, Christine Valentine calls relationships where the dead approve the actions of the living as mutually affirmative, since the experiences of her interlocutors “validated both the relationship itself as well as the identities of both parties” (Valentine 2018: 233). But for János, the relationship is not only about approval and affirmation, since he also confesses to his parents when something goes wrong: “I always apologise to them for being so miserable or incapable if I fail.” Without ever punishing him for his shortcomings beyond the grave, his parents remained his significant others: he measures himself up against their values and expectations.

On another level and in a different way, other dead people also have some kind of normative role for him. When we walked together in the local cemetery to see which graves he cared for, he frequently mentioned respect as his motive for caring for a certain grave. As he said, “one sees quality when going around in the graveyard” and that there are many “for whom one could raise one’s hat”. He praised these people – usually of his parents’ generation – for being honest, kind, helpful, hard-working, and ready to do things for the benefit of the community: like the old shoemaker who never refused to repair a shoe, was kind to everybody and always talked gently with his wife, the butcher’s wife who always kept the house neat and tidy, or the postmaster and his wife who contributed greatly to the development of the village. He often contrasted these traits with the present state of the village community. Like most of my other interlocutors, he sees the village as declining demographically and economically and complains about disintegrating community life: many people have left, the number of abandoned houses is growing, and the new settlers do not try to integrate. The small benches where people used to gather for a daily chat have disappeared from in front of the houses, people live secluded lives, do not visit their neighbours as freely as they did in the past, everybody is preoccupied with their own lives and welfare, and it is hard to involve people in community events.<sup>15</sup> János has an especially bleak view of today’s society – local and global alike, claiming that animosity, jealousy, dishonesty, ungratefulness and disrespect are now common characteristics. When he pays respect to the dead of his parents’ generation, he respects the values of honesty, integrity, a strong work ethic and sociability. In other words, for him, the dead embody everything that he so painfully misses in present-day society.

## CONCLUSION: INDIVIDUAL VIEWS AND GLOBAL TRENDS

How someone imagines and relates to the dead is always a unique combination of different traditions, discourses and individual deductions shaped during interactions with others, or exposure to various content in the time of mass and social media. Just how idiosyncratic it is depends on how much chance one has to negotiate and harmonise one’s ideas with others. What happens after death is not a usual topic of conversation in János’ village, especially not for

men, but as some of his remarks implied, people do sometimes talk about it, even if jokingly. As mentioned before, personal encounters with the dead are usually only shared within an intimate circle of family or friends because many fear they would not be understood.<sup>16</sup>

Like most people, János comes across as someone who does not think much about the mysteries of life after death: I often felt that it was only due to my questions that he gave a second thought to certain aspects of the afterlife. While he had arguments against the reality of bodily resurrection and consistently rejected the idea that the dead could come back or communicate with the living in any form, he was uncertain about the whereabouts and fate of the souls after death, sometimes even contradicting himself.

His attitude towards the dead is an amalgam of several of the frameworks identified by Tony Walter: it has vague elements of Christian teachings; the prevalence of the feeling of indebtedness to the dead links it to vernacular forms of Catholic tradition; the emphasis on keeping the memory of the dead echoes the secular memory framework, and his strong emotional bonds with his parents fit into the framework of romantic love. But it does not fully fit any of them. For him, the dead are more than memories; they exist somewhere and affect the lives of the living, but the exact place and form of their existence is not relevant; one is obliged to take care of them driven by the principles of reciprocity but can only do so by respecting them and preserving their memory, mostly through tending their graves; bonds may continue after death with some, but direct communication is not possible with the dead.

Despite their uniqueness, János' views show similar traits to those of his fellow villagers and those described in contemporary Western societies (see Walter 2018; Day 2012; Valentine 2018; Klass & Silverman & Nickman 1996), e.g., their diversity and their detachment from religious ideas (Day 2012; Walter 2017, 2018). A lack of detailed knowledge about the realms of the Catholic otherworld and the doctrinal path that souls may take to redemption is common in the local community. I was surprised by how many of my Catholic interlocutors were unaware of the doctrine of Purgatory and what it meant for the relationship between the living and the dead, even though they had attended catechism classes. This may be due to the poor effectiveness of these classes, the local clergy putting less emphasis on the obligation to spiritually assist the dead, the influence of Calvinism, or other factors that have yet to be revealed.<sup>17</sup> In János's case, his rather pragmatic religiosity<sup>18</sup> could be one such factor, as well as his questioning of the Church's authority in general; while he believes in God, he is increasingly discontent with the Church's growing entanglement with the state in present-day Hungary.

As many have noted, there has been a major shift in the role of the dead in Western societies. From entities with power over the living, and to whom the living had certain obligations, they have transformed into spiritual companions or guardian angels who support and protect the living (Walter 2018: 50;



Klass 2015: 104). As Dennis Klass writes, in the twentieth century, the focus shifted from the well-being of the dead to the well-being of the survivors. At the same time, the notion of the hostile dead attacking and inflicting harm on the living has mainly disappeared (Klass 2015: 106), and if the dead have any influence on the life of the living, it is mostly positive (Goss & Klass 2005).

These features were often linked to the prevalence of individualism in contemporary Western societies. Klass, for example, suggested that the reason why the dead are no longer hostile is that they have lost their normative power over the living. He supposes that this mirrors changes in interpersonal relationships between the living, where the gradual disintegration of close-knit, face-to-face communities with tight social control and high social expectations give people more personal freedom in choosing whom they want closer ties with and cutting unsatisfactory bonds. Similarly, “the living can now modulate which aspects of the relationship continue after the death, much as an individual can modulate which aspects continue after a divorce” (Klass 2015: 106).

Others see individualism as similarly being a driver for the diversity of afterlife beliefs. Abby Day, for example, pointed out that afterlife beliefs for many people are primarily rooted in personal “experiences of sensing the presence of their deceased relatives” instead of abstract religious teachings (Day 2012: 173). Christine Valentine also argued that “the idiosyncratic nature of these relationships may in part reflect a lack of grounding in shared traditional religious or cultural structures” and that “they demonstrate a culture of individualism that respects diversity in how people mourn and remember their dead” (Valentine 2018: 232). There are no dominant frameworks or narratives imposed on people by authoritative institutions like there were in the past; people have access to several frameworks and may choose freely among them.

While these arguments are certainly valid in some social contexts, they do not fully apply to János’s case. Firstly, he clearly has nostalgia for a life with less individualism and more dedication to the community. The values he cherishes – honour, integrity, helpfulness, sociability, reciprocity – are values linked to close-knit, interpersonal communities. And these values are also an integral part of his relationship with the dead: reciprocity as one of the driving forces for keeping their memory and caring for their graves, and the others as the values upheld by the dead people he respected. The fact that he takes care of a large number of graves belonging to people he had various types of connections to also goes against processes of individualisation and shrinking social networks. In a village community that is becoming increasingly individualistic, his relationship with the dead reflects interpersonal relationships of the past rather than the present.

Secondly, we can see that the dead have had a normative influence on him, even though they have never been hostile to him. Their normative role is more indirect. Abby Day argued that continuing bonds are more about preserving the

relationship than the individual (Day 2012: 174); for János, his parents retained their parental roles and the authority that comes with it – except for the power of retribution. His parents, along with some of the other deceased, are also seen as role models, representatives of an ideal social order, which is, again, a normative function.

Thirdly, I think, the reason for the growing diversity of afterlife beliefs is not only the lack of shared grand narratives due to a preference for individual choices, but the gradual disappearance of knowledge shared in local and other types of close-knit communities. Grand narratives have always been challenged by vernacular knowledge (cf. Valk 2022: 15; Hesz 2020). Despite being condemned as superstition by the Church and scientific discourses, the belief in ghosts or unorthodox imaginations of the afterlife was abundant in vernacular traditions throughout Europe. Individual ideas have always differed, but in more traditional, close-knit communities with extended and intensive social interactions, people shared and negotiated their experiences and ideas and thus had the chance to arrive at common understandings. Today, however, even rural communities lack the forums for constructing a shared platform of knowledge about the dead and the afterlife.

What does János's case tell us about the relationship with the dead in contemporary societies? I would argue that his case is interesting because it broadens the scope of research. Most studies focus on people's relationships with their deceased loved ones (mostly working with the bereaved), on people who have had personal encounters with the dead, or on the role of the politically significant dead. János's case fits none of these categories fully, making him an unusual or atypical subject of study.

Following the vernacular religious approach and studying individual conceptualisations holistically within the context of their social environment can reveal the complexity of people's relationship with the dead, and the complexity of the dead's role in an individual's life. János's case shows that in addition to the continuing bonds with deceased loved ones, people may have meaningful relationships with a wider circle of dead acquaintances even in contemporary society, and that personal encounters with the dead are not a prerequisite for their influence on one's life. His case also shows that while relationships with the dead are affected by changing social relationships and values, they do not necessarily reflect them – they may, in fact, represent relationships and values of the past.

## NOTES

- 1 The research leading to the results presented in the paper has received funding from the European Research Council grant agreement No. 101095729 (ERC project DEAGENCY). The views and opinions expressed are however those of the author only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Research Council Executive Agency; neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them. While working on the paper I had the opportunity to discuss the draft version with the Deagency project team members;

I'm grateful for their comments and advice. I also express my gratitude to the two anonymous peer-reviewers for helping me refine my paper with their valuable insights.

- 2 Research has attributed this inconsistency to the context-bound, situative nature of individual views (Valk 2022; Lewis 1986; Day 2012: 170), or to the intuitivity (Bering 2022; Hodge 2011; Visuri 2023) or counterintuitivity (Astuti 2007) of beliefs in existence after death.
- 3 I am immensely grateful to the members of this organisation for their kindness, hospitality, and invaluable help during my fieldwork.
- 4 Ca. thirty people attend the Sunday mass regularly, about 4% of the number of Catholics in the 2022 census. For comparison, in the 1970s, three Sunday masses were celebrated: one in the early morning for women and children, one at 11 o'clock for men and one in the afternoon for those who missed the other two.
- 5 One of the reasons for this may be his rather critical stance towards the Church as an institution – an issue I will address below.
- 6 He even implied that paying for masses more frequently is mainly for attention-grabbing.
- 7 It is not uncommon in the community to put something the dead particularly liked – a bottle of spirits or wine, for example – into the coffin.
- 8 For the largest collection see: 'Visszajáró halott' [Revenants] in the Digital Database of Hungarian Folk Beliefs: <https://hiedelemszovegek.boszorkanykorok.hu/tartalom.html>.
- 9 Only one of them was Calvinist.
- 10 Others must have had the same idea since many asked him if he had "experienced anything".
- 11 Following the approach of the Deagency project I take what my interlocutors say seriously, and do not judge if their relationship with the dead is real or imaginary. This will also be reflected in the wording of this paper: instead of using an "objective" or distancing language, I will write about the dead as impactful entities, when my interlocutor talks about them as such.
- 12 He also visits the graves of in-laws and acquaintances in other settlements on All Souls' Day and whenever he happens to pass by.
- 13 Writing about the dead's presence in Catholic communities in mid-twentieth century America, Robert A. Orsi also considers praying for the souls of Purgatory a form of an ancestor cult, although inheritance was not a factor in the relationship between the living and the dead there (Orsi 2016: 195).
- 14 For Eastern Christian examples see: Kenna 1976: 23–28; Danforth & Tsiras 1982: 124.
- 15 To be fair, outsiders like me may have a less negative impression of the village's present community life, as there are several active civil organisations in the village, one of which is a nationally recognised cultural association organised around the local village museum with a highly engaged membership. Nevertheless, loosening social ties and less intensive everyday interaction in formerly close-knit local communities are trends researchers have been reporting for decades (for Hungary see: Jávör et al. 2000: 999).
- 16 More than one of my interlocutors thanked me for the opportunity to talk about their experiences with the dead.
- 17 According to the priest, the number of masses paid for the salvation of the dead has decreased significantly in the last decades. I did not have access to the official registry of votive masses, therefore I cannot statistically prove his statement, but my interlocutors also had the same impression.
- 18 He praised his priest uncle, for example, for pursuing lay activities (such as working in his vineyard, keeping animals or playing sports) and not being very pushy with spiritual teachings.

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# Maternal Mortality and Rituals: Exploring Agency of the Dead Through a Haunted Malay Doctor

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**Abstract:** This paper discusses a belief narrative collected in 2018 that revolves around a Malay Muslim student doctor being haunted by the spirit of a woman who died in childbirth. A ritual was described as being performed by the doctor on advice from her mother who was a traditional midwife. In Islam, requesting for assistance through supernatural help other than the Islamic God is frowned upon and thus this usage of ritual would be considered “un-Islamic” in practice. After examining the history of Malay beliefs in birth spirits and rituals, alongside cultural as well as workplace expectations for student doctors, this paper suggests that traditional rituals such as the ones used in this belief narrative allow agency to the dead, which in turn, assists the living in coming to terms with unexpected deaths.

**Keywords:** ritual, belief narrative, Malay, Islam, ghosts, spirits, the dead, agency, maternal mortality

## INTRODUCTION

In traditions of disbelief, narratives focus on “rationalizing” unexplained circumstances that could be attributed to supernatural phenomena. In Europe, the “dominant” framework is that of disbelief (Bennett 1999: 151) where in studies from England and Denmark, for example (Bennett 1999 and Raahauge 2016 respectively), interviewees were cautious about how they framed their experiences with the supernatural because of the general disbelieving tendency of the population. This does not mean that traditions of belief are absent in Europe; indeed, in all the studies mentioned earlier, respondents show that they take part in such a tradition, where they believe in the existence of the supernatural. However, folklorists are careful with the manner in which they broach the topic of the supernatural, as certain terms may provoke defensiveness. Malaysians, on the other hand, are not only open to believing in the existence of the supernatural; they are also not shy in talking about it. As a Malaysian Malay woman myself, I have had many late-night chats with friends about various types of *hantu* (roughly translated as “ghost”), and when one tells of a supernatural experience, one is almost always met with support. To disbelieve in the otherworldly is seen as strange. But believing is not a straightforward process. For the Malays, who are indigenous to Malaysia, belief is complicated because of the way their culture has developed and negotiated with new belief elements throughout history.

In the field of folklore, the concept of “belief” in relation to categorizing folk narratives has been widely discussed and debated. I am particularly drawn to the idea that believing is a “way of knowledge”, allowing for understanding how people “apprehend and discuss reality” (Motz 1998: 340). This enables a more respectful approach to the cultural phenomenon being studied, instead of grouping the practices as “other” to the researcher. For the contents of this paper, I am using the term “belief narrative” as outlined by Valk (2024) which refers to “genres with pronounced fantastic and supernatural elements, such as myth, legend, related miracle stories, and folktales, but also to more realistic genres, such as oral history, [and] personal experience narrative” (Valk 2024: 181). Referring to a belief narrative in this paper is more appropriate as the story told to me is part of the Malay folkloric category of *cerita hantu* (ghost story), which in this instance consists of a haunting through a personal experience narrative.

Nicholas and Kline (2010) describe the *cerita hantu* as being “ubiquitous” in Malay culture and tied to the “mystical world view that has and continues to pervade this society” (Nicholas & Kline 2010: 197). The authors argue that the ghosts that are prevalent in these stories are not to be dismissed as being fictional; rather, they are thought to “really” exist. It is important to note that as a belief narrative, the story is considered true to the storyteller and thus worth investigating. But perhaps, arguably, more noteworthy are Nicholas

and Kline's later remarks that "*Hantu* manifest in reality; they have actual and pragmatic effects on the lives of living individuals" (Ibid.).

In their research, the authors investigated the effects of the *pontianak cerita hantu* as propagating gendered constructs of the subjugation and control of women. According to Nicholas and Kline's (2010) informant, the *pontianak* has two forms: its monstrous form and its human form. In its monstrous form, the *pontianak* is considered as irrational/uncontrolled; with the phallic nail driven into the back of her neck, the *pontianak* is subdued, becoming a beautiful human woman who is then seen as rational/controlled (Nicholas & Kline 2010: 202–203). For this study, however, while the *cerita hantu* being analyzed finds its roots in the *pontianak* story, it is told from a different perspective – that of the ritual to contain this ghost born of maternal mortality. I propose that in addition to the containment of the ghost, another effect returns agency to the dead from which the ghost originated, providing release to the community that is being haunted by the ghost.

With an understanding of the usage of key terms that will be used in this paper, it would be useful to explain the origins of the story found here. In 2018, I conducted a project collecting stories by Malaysian women. Over a hundred stories were told, covering a range of genres. Some were morality tales, others were romantic, and quite a few were *cerita hantu*. This paper will focus on one story that falls under the category of *cerita hantu* told by a Malay respondent from Bangi, Malaysia. Before going into the story narrated to the author, we provide background on the Malaysian Malays and their beliefs, including the belief in malevolent birth spirits that inform the backdrop of the story.

## THE MALAYS AND BIRTH SPIRITS

The Malays in Malaysia today are made up of many different indigenous groups from across the Malay archipelago, conveniently named as such by the various European powers that had colonized the area (Milner 2008: 5). Though customs and traditions might differ between Malaysian states and tribal groups, the Malays in Peninsular Malaysia (or West Malaysia) have all been historically animistic, before embracing Hinduism and Buddhism, and then later Islam from as early as the 13th century (Ibid.: 14). This history is reflected in the Malays' traditions and narratives, where elements of the Islamic faith are present, but so are pre-Islamic elements that vary depending on the geographic source. Indeed, it would be of no surprise to folklorists that there does not exist a monolithic version of Malay traditions and practice; Malay historian Anthony Reid has noted that though "Islamic law books were becoming influential" in the 16th and 17th century Malay courts, "local oral tradition continued to be interpreted by the village elders" (Reid 1988: 137). One particular oral tradition that is of interest to this paper is the Malay birth tradition, which includes

a belief in malevolent birth spirits. One can find early records of this tradition in Skeat and Blagden's influential *Malay Magic* (1900)

In the chapter dedicated to "Birth Spirits", the authors describe three types of spirits that were a source of fear in childbirth: the *langsuir*, being the spirit of a woman who has died of childbirth, the *pontianak*, as the stillborn child ghost of the *langsuir*, and the *penanggal* that sucks the blood of newborn children. The authors give detailed descriptions of the ways these spirits look and sound, but rather than the actual spirits themselves, this paper is interested in locating the source of the fear they induced in their audience. These spirits can thus be summed up as the ghosts of devastating outcomes of childbirth: the death of the child and the death of the mother. A short description is given of the rituals that surround the prevention of such ghosts:

*To prevent [a woman from becoming a langsuyar] a quantity of glass beads are put in the mouth of the corpse, a hen's egg is put under each arm-pit, and needles are placed in the palms of the hands. It is believed that if this is done the dead woman cannot become a langsuyar, as she cannot open her mouth to shriek (ngilai) or wave her arms as wings, or open and shut her hands to assist her flight.*  
(Sir William Maxwell in Skeat & Blagden 1900: 312)

More than 80 years after the publication of Skeat and Blagden's *Malay Magic*, Carol Laderman's *Wives and Midwives: Childbirth and Nutrition in Rural Malaysia* (1983) provides an updated account of the roles of these spirits in the birth traditions of Malay women. Laderman's main thesis concerns childbirth practices in Merchang, Terengganu, and she also has a chapter dedicated to local beliefs on the supernatural and childbirth. Here, the *pontianak*, *langsuir* and *penanggal* make another appearance. But the naming of the spirits has changed; the *pontianak* and *langsuir* are both considered to be the ghosts of women who died in childbirth, and the *penanggal* has become merely a disembodied head dragging along its entrails. It seems that from Blagden and Skeat's publication until Laderman's 1983 study, the belief in these figures remained strong and rituals were still in place to protect mothers and their children at childbirth. Indeed, the *bomoh* (roughly translated as shaman) in Laderman's study appeared more confident in his capabilities to contain the spirits, mentioning that though the *langsuir* had been a problem in the past, the community now knew how to deal with them; the *bomoh* advised piercing the ghost's neck with iron or steel while repeating the appropriate spell (1983: 129). While the *bomoh* is usually a popular figure to mention when discussing Malay magic and beliefs, an equally important figure in childbirth rituals is the *bidan kampung* (village midwife). In Laderman's book, she is indispensable the moment a woman in the village becomes pregnant and her role includes not only attending to the physical

delivery of the newborn baby, but also psychologically supporting the mother and family before and after childbirth.

According to Ali and Howden-Chapman (2007), the main role of the *bidan kampung* today continues to be to provide emotional and physical support for pregnancy and birth, and they are seen as an option especially for rural women without access to modern “Western” facilities in urban areas. It is important to note that a *bidan kampung* is a traditional role and, unlike a government midwife, does not have medical training and is not considered a legal alternative to a hospital birth. While training had been given to *bidan kampung* prior to 1979, it was stopped because of “bad practices” that were supposedly harmful to mothers and children. It was alleged that *bidan kampungs* did not practice germ theory, though in reality, they were very aware of keeping the birth spaces clean for the safety of delivery (Ali & Howden-Chapman 2007: 279). Perhaps medical institutions (and the ruling Islamic establishments<sup>2</sup>) were less enthusiastic about the beliefs that were supported by the *bidan kampung* (Laderman 1983: 105). For example, the *bidan kampung* and other traditional Malay healers were concerned about a person’s *semangat* (roughly translated as spirit or life force); in the case of a pregnant woman, her *semangat* would be in a weaker state and thus more susceptible to attacks by spirits (Chen 1981: 127–128). This case of a weakened *semangat* meant that the *bomoh* or *bidan kampung* would sometimes use rituals that were not considered “scientific” or Islamic to combat the spirits.

Michael Peletz’s *Reason and Passion: Representation of Gender in a Malay Society* (1996) sees the accessibility of modern medicine as a crucial development in relation to belief in spirits and traditions of childbirth among the Malays. Peletz, while focusing on the subject of Malay dispositions, provides a crucial development in the belief in spirits and the traditions of childbirth amongst the Malays: the accessibility of modern medicine. Peletz explores this topic through a chapter on pregnancy and birth in a village in the state of Negeri Sembilan. He describes very briefly a few things that pregnant women should be careful of, such as forests, as they are considered dangerous places. Again, they need to obtain protection against “ravenous blood-sucking spirits (*pelisit*<sup>3</sup>, *langsuir*, etc.)” (Peletz 1996: 216). In his fieldwork, he notes that all births were now conducted in hospitals, where the *bidan kampung* may be in attendance, but only to assist (Ibid.: 218). This is an important development in Malay birth rituals as we see that within a decade, birth has become more medicalized; though the setting for delivering children has changed, the role of the *bidan kampung* still exists.

The previous works by Skeat and Blagden (1900), Laderman (1983), and Peletz (1996) had collected stories from ritual practitioners, having worked with the *bomoh*, *bidan kampung*, or mothers directly. To the author’s knowledge, such an ethnographic study has not been conducted since. The topic of birth spirits persists, however, but from a different perspective. Rather than

focusing on how to manage the spirit, the focus of research turned to the figure of the ghost. Indeed, most research tends to focus on one iteration of this ghostly figure, now popularly referred to as the *pontianak*. In an ethnographic study by Cheryl L. Nicholas and Kimberly N. Kline from 2002 to 2006, the authors recorded a belief narrative from Makcik<sup>4</sup> Salimah in Taiping, Perak. Here, the interviewee is not a shaman or a midwife usually in attendance at a birth, but an everyday woman in her 50s who was eager to tell the interviewer about the dangers of the *pontianak*. She describes the *pontianak* as the ghost of a person who has died in childbirth, and states that to avoid the corpse from becoming this ghost, one had to place needles in the joints of the corpse (Nicholas & Kline 2010: 209).

This shift in focus from the spirit being a real source of danger to it being a mostly fictionalized figure that scares in a *cerita hantu* is perhaps emblematic of the gradual change in the dangers of childbirth. Before the advent of modern medicine, giving birth was an event that could cause worry amongst potential mothers as well as their family members. Tracing this history in Malaysia, the maternal mortality rate was around 600 deaths per 100,000 births in the 1950s, when modern maternal healthcare was still only available in the city, dropping to 300 in the 1960s, and finally nearing zero from the 1990s onwards (Pathmanathan & Liljestr nd & Martins 2003: 3). We see this trend of decreasing maternal mortality rates all over the world where mothers can safely access modern medical institutions. Still, these rates could change depending on historical circumstances. For example, though Malaysian maternal mortality rates were at an all-time low of 21 deaths per 100,000 live births in 2019, the rates more than tripled to 68.2 during COVID lockdown measures because of a lack of medical assistance and communal involvement (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2024). Also, while there are fewer dangers in childbirth in present-day Malaysia, the mortality rate is still higher than that of more industrialized countries such as Japan or Estonia where the maternal mortality rate is 4 and 5 deaths out of 100,000 live births respectively. Perhaps because there is still a considerable maternal mortality rate in Malaysia, birth spirits such as the *pontianak* still linger in the collective consciousness of the Malay people.

## SYNCRETIC MALAY BELIEFS

Earlier, Makcik Salimah's account of meeting and dealing with a *pontianak* was discussed as part of Nicholas and Kline's (2010) research. An element that stuck out was the ease with which Makcik Salimah told of the rituals involved in subduing the spirit; the interview was conducted within the confines of telling a *cerita hantu*, which perhaps accounts for Makcik Salimah's comfort at describing the ghost as well as the ritual involved. This comfort is strange considering the way traditional rituals are viewed by Malay Muslims in Malaysia. Indeed, all the rituals outlined by the authors mentioned earlier could be



considered strange as in all four cases by Skeat and Blagden (1900), Laderman (1983), Peletz (1996), as well as Nicholas and Kline (2010), the Malays would have been professing the Muslim faith and dealing with *bomoh*, and spirits would be considered a form of *syirik*<sup>5</sup>, a practice heavily disapproved of in today's Malaysian Muslim society. Due to the fact that many Muslim Malays continue to seek supernatural assistance despite this help being considered un-Islamic, the Malaysian government has outlined rules to ensure that assistance from *bomoh* remained within the confines of Islam:

*(a) practice should not use any form of magic or witchcraft; (b) it must be based on the principle of Oneness of God (tawhid) and the belief that there is no power other than God capable of bringing good or bad to anyone; (c) one cannot slaughter animals in the process of treatment unless it is done in an Islamic way; and (d) it must not violate any principle of Islamic law (Abdul Halim 1999 in Haque 2008: 692). Although bomohs may violate these rules, they nearly always claim that they practice within the boundaries of government regulations, giving a sense of security to their clients. (Haque 2008: 692)*

This attempt to create Islamic boundaries within Malay traditions is a relatively new phenomenon that can be traced back to the 1970s where there was a surge of Islamic revivalism. This period heavily influenced all aspects of Malay life, from the personal to the political sphere (Kloos 2019: 163). Peletz goes so far as to say that “Malaysia’s Islamic resurgence [...] has highlighted and endeavored to restrict women’s sexuality and bodily processes”, specifically through women’s “biological production” (Peletz 2002: 189). In particular, there was a concerted move by the government as well as external agencies such as the World Health Organization (WHO) to shift births from the home to more modern medical institutions. Stivens finds that “(women’s) ‘traditional’ knowledge has been more and more devalued by ‘moderns’ and the state, although we also see many of these practices still firmly adhered to” (Stivens 1998: 68). In conjunction with these efforts, Malay religious officials also denounce these traditional practices, though instead of saying that they are not modern, they consider them to be “un-Islamic” (Ibid.: 68).

Islam, as the official religion of Malaysia, is deeply tied to the idea of being Malay. Indeed, in the constitution, a Malay person is defined as being born in Malaysia, speaking the Malay language, practicing the Malay customs, and, perhaps most importantly, as being Muslim (Article 160, Federal Constitution of Malaysia: 130). This aspect of Malay identity is of interest to this paper because the lived reality of the Malay people is much more complicated than the equation of Malay = Muslim. One of the tenets of being considered a “good” Muslim is that a person should only believe in the religion of Islam and its

God and should not ask for help from any other being except the Muslim God. Indeed, in Islamic religious studies in Malaysia, many articles have been written about needing to stick to the “true” way and not be influenced by “confusing” alternate avenues of prayer (Abdullah 2023: 208; Salleh et al. 2017: 76). But of course, belief is a tricky thing. In truth, many Muslim Malays would still consider themselves “good” Muslims even if they consulted a *bomoh* or sought help from traditional healers that made use of some sort of magic to cure them of their ills. This is perhaps because while the *bomoh* and traditional healers might not be Islamic religious leaders per se, they do include Quranic verses and Islamic prayers as part of their rituals.

This syncretic belief system, where the Quran is used within shamanistic practices, is one that has been seen as quite a defining feature of Malay beliefs (Morrison 2022; Nicholas & Ganapathy & Mau 2013). Morrison defines this syncretism as

*a phenomenon that allows Malaysians to borrow ideas, beliefs, and rituals from people of other faiths in much the same way that Malaysians celebrate each other's holidays, wear clothing with designs from outside their own sub-cultures and incorporate words from several languages into one sentence. (Morrison 2022: 23)*

But this merging of the many disparate parts of the Malay identity may prove problematic in the eyes of a devout Malay Muslim. Nicholas & Ganapathy & Mau (2013) find that it “is pragmatically paradoxical; one cannot be both a ‘good Muslim’ and hold traditional beliefs. Malay Muslims who do have syncretic proclivities are, therefore, very careful in how they maintain their presentations of selves as ‘good Muslims’” (Nicholas & Ganapathy & Mau 2013: 170).

## BELIEF NARRATIVE: A HAUNTED DOCTOR

This brings us to the belief narrative that had been related to the author. Hajar is a Malay woman in her early 30s who grew up in Banting, Selangor and at the time of the interview, lived in Bangi and worked in Putrajaya. Her mother was Singaporean-Chinese and her father was from Johor, but they made their lives in Banting. This is a usual type of modern Malay individual; since the 1970s many Malaysian women have left their rural hometowns to search for jobs elsewhere (Ong 1988). At the time of the interview, Hajar worked at the Ministry of Women, Family, and Community Development in Putrajaya. We spoke in a mix of Malay and English, and she was quite enthusiastic about retelling the stories that had been told to her while she was growing up in Banting. She was both excited as well as serious about retelling *cerita hantu*, especially those based on personal experiences. She told of three separate *cerita hantu*, two of which were experienced by Hajar’s daughter and one which she had experienced herself,

before introducing the story that had been told to Hajar by her sister. Due to the length of the story, I have summarized it as follows:

*Hajar's sister was still in training to become a doctor when she told this story. She was working in the Intensive Care Unit and was tending to the body of a woman who had just delivered a child but suffered severe blood loss (tumpah darah). Hajar's sister was in charge of the comatose woman for about twenty days before the woman died. She had been responsible for monitoring the woman during this period, even meeting the woman's husband and newborn child. Upon her death, Hajar's sister took care of the body's final preparations. At one point, she thought that perhaps the woman had not died because the body released a sigh. But upon checking everything one more time, it was confirmed that the woman was dead. Hajar had taped down the woman's eyes, tied her feet, prepared the body to be taken by forensics, and then prepared a report to be submitted. When Hajar's sister left the hospital, however, she felt as if the woman's "semangat" (spirit) hung over her and became melancholic ("terkesan"). In the days that followed, she began to fixate on all the people in her life who had died: her grandmother, her aunt, her former teachers. Her fingernails even turned blue. She sought counsel from her mother, a bidan kampung who, after some prodding, discovered that her daughter had tended to a woman who died in childbirth. The mother gave her instructions: wear the deceased woman's clothes and powder. The doctor was to mix the water of the soil that the woman was buried in with the water she used to bathe. The doctor was also to recite the Salawat as she bathed, repeating this ritual for three days in a row. Hajar's sister followed her mother's instructions and only then did she regain normalcy.*

When I had attempted to explain this story to my Malay Muslim friends, I was met with nervous looks and comments about how "that doesn't sound very Islamic". Despite their reticence, however, this story is an example of the way many systems of knowledge work within a contemporary Malay framework, highlighting the tensions that are persistent in Malay Muslim life. Hajar herself had been hesitant in offering information that her mother had been a *bidan kampung*; indeed, the reason that my friends were worried was because the ritual conducted in this story could have been considered a form of *syirik*. As mentioned earlier, Malays with "syncretic proclivities" need to find a way to show that they are "good Muslims". This is perhaps the reason for the adoption of the Salawat within the ritual. The Salawat is a prayer for the veneration of the Prophet Muhammad, and thus its usage as part of the healing allows an easing of the tension between Islam and this traditional ritual. It appears

to show the practitioner and the listener that they are seeking help from the Muslim God, and not any other power. As seen from the responses from the author's friends, however, this practice, even with Islamic elements, is not so easily accepted. Perhaps if the author had not conducted this interview within the space of an academic study, Hajar might not have been so keen on relating this story in more casual circumstances.

## DETACHMENT FROM DEATH: A MEDICAL AND MALAY CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

While a figure such as the *bidan kampung* is regarded with suspicion by urban Malay Muslims today, they are arguably even more needed in today's hospitals. At the time of writing this paper, the data is unavailable for Malaysia, but there is increasing research on student doctors and their narratives concerning a lack of training on dealing with patients' deaths. Student doctors are placed in the hospital having been trained to view the patients with detachment; the patients are mere objects to be treated, not humans to be empathized with. Still, even with this detached approach to treatment, student doctors often find that they are wholly unprepared for and do not know how to deal with death (Tri-vate et al. 2019: 8). By contrast, students found that they could find solace in their nursing partners, who have been trained in how to empathize with their patients and were better at navigating the complicated emotions surrounding death at work (Crowe & Brugha 2022: 10). Indeed, in this same study, one respondent appeared to have had an experience similar to that of Hajar's sister: the patient that the student doctor was treating experienced gruesome pregnancy complications that led to the student doctor feeling traumatized when later faced with delivering her own child (Ibid.). Hajar's sister, as a young student doctor herself in the narrative, was faced with an unexpected and violent death and was given no support at work. Indeed, to be seen as a capable doctor in the culture of detachment in the medical field, one needed to "intellectualize their emotional experiences" instead of displaying empathy (Ibid.: 3).

This culture of detachment in the medical field finds common ground with the Malays' view on appropriate emotional expressions. As mentioned earlier, a detailed account of birthing rituals can be found in Laderman's (1983) ethnographic study. Alongside documenting intricate cultural practices surrounding childbirth, there are observations on the Malays, particularly the women, being insistent on complete control over their emotions, even in the face of pain and death. In one anecdote, a woman had been going through a difficult birth, with two *bomohs* called in. Quranic verses and Malay spells were read, doors and windows were opened to allow for sympathetic magic. This act of opening doors and windows appeared to symbolize the opening of the woman's body, allowing her to give birth safely. But the child was stillborn; a *hantu* (ghost) was blamed for its death. Upon viewing the stillbirth, the crowd around the mother chanted "tak apa-apa" (it's nothing, it's alright) (Laderman 1983:

164), which was similarly repeated by the mother. No tears were shed by anyone. At the funeral for the stillborn child, Laderman was the only one crying. When her assistant saw her tears, he quipped that when his wife almost died delivering a stillborn child, he did not shed a tear (Ibid.: 166). Malay Muslims believe that crying over a grave disturbs the dead, and thus women are usually not allowed at burials. This Muslim tradition, coupled with the horror of the death of a child, or the death of the mother during childbirth, is made even more distressing perhaps because of this Malay “denial of emotions” (Ibid.).

In this case, we see that Hajar’s sister had faced external pressure to suppress her emotions from two different sources: her medical community as well as her Malay upbringing. For Hajar’s sister, not being able to discuss the unexpected and violent death of her patient kept the spirit of the woman closer to her, perhaps causing her to be haunted. In the Malay belief system, to be haunted or possessed by a spirit is considered a form of illness, one that had originally been cured by spiritual healers such as *bomohs* (Haque 2008: 689). Perhaps it is of no surprise then that “(most) of the conditions treated by Malay shamans are classified by them as *sakit berangin*, a disease whose etiology is the frustration of talent, character, and desires” (Laderman 1983: 166).

## DEATH, RITUALS, AND AGENCY

Upon understanding the background of belief and the culture of detachment that pervades this story, it would be useful to look at the practice of rituals in Malay traditions. In contemporary Malaysia, Malays are slowly moving away from the more community-based ideas of living, evident in the rituals of birth and death, and more into an individualized form of existence, particularly in the city, which draws a person further away from their traditions through the medicalization of healing (Peletz 1996: 211). In an influential study Aihwa Ong mentions that “cosmopolitan medical concepts and drugs often have an anestheticizing effect, which erases the authentic” (Ong 1988: 40). For a doctor, the patient is removed and placed afar through detachment. The medicalization of death can remove agency from the dead through the ‘cold’ unfeeling way one is supposed to handle the body; in turn, a sudden tragic death can be construed as the beginning of a horror narrative<sup>6</sup>.

These horror narratives surrounding death can be traced back to the idea of control. A Foucauldian reading of the body sees it as a site of control, one in which the body is regulated and pacified by those in power to serve the interests of the powerful (Foucault 1973). In Malay society, as with many other societies, women’s bodies are heavily controlled by both external sources and the woman herself. Birth rituals can be read as a way to control the body to perform in a way that society and the woman wants it to. Death is the exact opposite of the outcome desired. To exacerbate this fact, maternal mortality in the face of modern medicine’s attempt to overcome it makes the dead body of a woman who died



in childbirth “ungovernable”. In fact, Csordas (1994) and Becker (1995) characterize illness as an experience of the body as ungovernable (as cited in Hallam & Hockey & Haworth 1999: 11). The event of death thus becomes a source of horror. The agency of the dead woman is evident from the reactions to her dead body; rituals to control the dead body imply that the dead woman can exact retribution, obtaining a second life. One could argue that the “social presence” of the dead body resurrects itself through the form of a ghost – a possible symbol of freedom from the control with which society had once restrained it in life.

This social presence after death showcases the liminal aspects of death, which have affected storytelling traditions worldwide. Within the narrative traditions of horror, this liminality is viewed through figures of the undead. Hallam & Hockey & Haworth (1999: 2) provide a matrix of body/selves that can show how we view anxieties about death and the body, as reflected in creatures of horror:

■ *socially and biologically alive: socially and biologically dead*

■ *socially dead / biologically alive: socially alive / biologically dead*

In the first instance, a “normal”, acceptable interaction with a person is when they are alive both socially and biologically, or when they are dead, both socially and biologically. To be socially alive means that a living person connects with their society using their body, and in turn their body, or person, is given meaning by the people they meet. To be socially dead would imply ending one’s connection with a person; therefore, to be “truly” dead would imply not only one’s body ceasing to function, but that social ties to one’s person have been severed as well. Hallam & Hockey & Haworth (1999) discuss the people who are socially dead but biologically alive as those who are in a vegetative state; they argue that when translated into the horror genre, one can draw parallels with the zombie. In the story that Hajar tells, when Hajar’s sister cares for the patient, she is in this state. Biologically, the woman was alive, but she was unable to take part in social life. To be socially alive but biologically dead however, would include figures like a stillborn child; in its horror counterpart, the authors find vampires to fit this description. In the case of the woman who died in childbirth featured in Hajar’s story, this figure fits the category of being biologically dead but socially alive. According to the authors, “to remain socially alive after bodily demise can be [...] disruptive [as it can raise] the specter of the ‘pathologically’ grieving individual” (Hallam & Hockey & Haworth 1999: 3). A theory raised by Hallam, Hockey and Haworth (1999) proposes that the suddenness of death can cause a body’s continued social presence – they are not “a body [...] but a person” (Hallam & Hockey & Haworth 1999: 12). In Hajar’s sister’s case, who was assigned to her care for nearly a month, the dead woman



is only dead in terms of her body – but her social presence through her impact on Hajar’s sister – her “semangat” is very well alive.

So what happens when the ghost is not contained? Alongside birth and death rituals that deal with the body there are also rituals by the community to deal with a potential ghost. In the story collected here, we get advice from Hajar’s mother who had been a *bidan kampung*. It is important to reiterate that the *bidan kampung* is not a state-approved midwife; in Malaysia today, the law states that a *bidan kampung* could be in attendance of a birth so long as a government midwife is also there. It is unclear whether Hajar’s mother was a state-approved *bidan kampung* or not, but she was not a government midwife. Therefore, her methods are closer to Malay traditional birthing practices than those of a medically trained midwife. In these roles, the *bidan kampung* understands not only the bodily needs of her patients, but also their cultural needs. A *bidan kampung* such as Hajar’s mother would also have been experienced in providing psychological support. In this way, she provides a way to draw the social connections between Hajar’s sister and the dead woman to a close.

According to Peletz, “At death, the person ceases to exist in the sense of having a distinctive personality, but this does not necessarily mean that it is no longer endowed with agency (the capacity to influence the world of the living)” (1996: 209). In Peletz’ own fieldwork in Negeri Sembilan, he found that

*(some) of the rituals immediately following an individual's death reflect villagers' concerns to sever the emotional ties between the living and the deceased, or at least to minimize the negative impact of death upon the deceased's immediate survivors and help ensure that the spirit of the deceased will not be bothered by the grieving of his or her surviving kin. (Ibid.)*

Peletz’ observations during his fieldwork show the importance of ritual in severing the social connections of the dead so as not to raise the possibility of a “spectre” haunting the living.

Reflecting back on the culture of detachment in Hajar’s sister’s life, both from her medical world and the Malay world, Hajar’s sister needed to engage with the dead meaningfully in order to arrive at peace. It is only after acknowledging the dead woman as agentic was she able to transform a previous horror narrative into one that confronts and makes peace with the confoundingly unpredictable nature of death. The practice of this ritual can thus be seen as a way to reach catharsis, where the sister moved “beyond a pathology of pity to compassion” and “beyond a pathology of fear to serenity” (Kearney 2007: 52). This focus on the spirit shows that the Malay dead possesses agency which moves people to ensure that they can rest well and peacefully. In the event of a violent death, this is needed even more. The rituals of death, in this respect, give agency to the dead, keeping horror away from ordinary lives.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has explored a belief narrative on a ritual to contain the spirit of a woman who has died in childbirth. Through navigating the complex syncretic Malay belief systems, the history of the Malays' beliefs in birth spirits, and the obsession with controlling emotions when dealing with death, this paper shows the relevance of the birth spirits in contemporary Malaysia. In particular, the figure of the *bidan kampung* finds continued relevance in supporting Malay women through difficult experiences such as a traumatic death.

As mentioned in the beginning of this paper, the Malaysian Malays come from a tradition of belief where their acceptance of the supernatural at times sits uncomfortably with their desire to be seen as "good Muslims". Instead of "othering" the traditional practices such as birth rituals, understanding belief narratives through the perspective of belief as "a way of knowledge" (Motz 1998) allows one to empathize with the idea of the belief in birth spirits and rituals.

Positioning the traditional figure of the *bidan kampung* against the "modern" institutional doctors in this paper is not meant to hold up one against the other. Indeed, seeing as a large part of the history of Malay birth rituals had been recorded with birth practitioners, perhaps in Malaysia's more medicalized landscape, the role of the doctor may include bearing testimony to modern rituals. This may be through new rituals that are akin to the ones studied by Skeat and Blagden (1900), but are more suited to contemporary life. However, the role of the *bidan kampung* should not be neglected. As has been seen in other research that is critical of the medical institution, it is important that the cultural figure of the *bidan kampung* continue on in the lives of Malays. The personal anecdote provided by the storyteller in this study provides a unique insight into the psychologically healing potential of confronting the dead as an agentic being through the use of Malay rituals.

Further, it would be imprudent to believe that one woman's story is reflective of all Malay women's beliefs. I hope that this paper highlights the need for more research on the belief narratives of Malay women in Malaysia; Hajar's story is only one amongst many that could shed light on the fascinating ways in which the Malays negotiate the various elements of their beliefs. With Malaysia being an industrialized country with more and more of its women moving out of rural villages and into the city, it would be interesting to see how they navigate their traditions of beliefs with the institutionalized modern world.

## NOTES

- 1 Skeat and Blagden (1900) transcribe the name as "langsuyar" but the Malay "langsuir" is the accepted spelling in research on this figure today.
- 2 This attitude seems to mirror the licensing of midwives in Europe from as early as the 1400s (see Kontoyannis & Katsetos 2011 for more details on England, Germany and Holland). Generally,

though the importance of the midwives was felt by their communities, their knowledge was suspected as being linked to witchcraft by “[church] authorities in collaboration with male physicians” (Kontoyannis & Katsetos 2011: 32). Similarly in rural Italy, the midwife was seen as indispensable for assistance in childbirth, though should a death occur, she would immediately be accused of witchcraft due to her usage of “folk medicine” (Lippi 2012: 70).

- 3 The *pelisit* or *pelesit* “frequently [assumes] the form of grasshopper-like creatures with sharp, bloody teeth” (Peletz 1996: 251); it is “a familiar spirit that makes its “mother” appear fascinating to the opposite sex in return for meals of eggs or, some say, blood”, but it also has the potential to “interfere with the normal progress of birth” (Laderman 1983: 111).
- 4 *Makcik* is a Malay honorific for an older woman. Roughly translated to “auntie”, it can be used as an honorific for any older woman and is not exclusive to family members.
- 5 *Syirik* denotes asking for favors from a supernatural being other than the Islamic God.
- 6 Horror, in terms of its terminology, finds its origins in European scholarship on mostly literary texts and films, and thus using it in the context of a Malay ritual may seem strange at first (Ainslie 2016: 181). However, “horror stories” (to borrow from Stewart 1982) transcend storytelling and national boundaries, and undoubtedly find their origins in oral narratives, which include personal experience narratives on encounters with the supernatural, such as the one found in this paper.

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# Right Place, Right Behaviour: Deathscapes as a Moral Space in the Context of Alternative Spirituality in Slovakia

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**Abstract:** The paper addresses spiritual ideas and practices associated with the dead in the urban environment in Slovakia, a country with a predominantly Christian population, in relation to the transformation of cultural and religious worldviews which took place there in the 1990s. I consider how individuals who experienced the change of the political regime as adults and adopted new spiritual ideas reflect on the transformation of their worldviews, in particular in relation to the dead. I focus on the role of the space where the living and the dead act and communicate. In interpreting their accounts, I employ Mary Douglas' ideas about cosmology as a moral order, combining them with the approach to the study of human cognition known as distributed cognition. I also use the term deathscape, understood as the material expression in the landscape of practices relating to death. I argue that my interlocutors' experiences with the dead reflect their individualities as well as their specific life trajectories, but despite their diversities, they all share a moral dimension manifested through spatiality. In this, the idea of the universal energy characteristic of alternative spiritual currents is essential, as it unites the living and the dead in one community. This allows the reciprocal interaction of the two worlds and produces a feeling of the continual presence of the dead in the lives of the living. Thus, all accounts point to the same idea: the dead are part of society.

**Keywords:** alternative spirituality, spiritual energy, space, morality, deathscapes, Slovakia, fall of communism

## INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of anthropological research, space has been identified as an intrinsic element of culture (Low & Lawrence-Zúñiga 2003). In all societies, people create a symbolic orientation schema and ascribe meanings to things in accordance with their place in the universe. Recent research on the human mind has demonstrated that space is central to human cognition, as it provides the framework for thinking about objects and events and underlies more abstract conceptualizations of time, kinship and social relations (Brown 2015: 294). In the context of organised religions as well as in the context of spirituality outside religious institutions, the symbolic cultural order includes the image of the Otherworld inhabited by incorporeal beings and the souls of the dead, and the investigation of folk stories has demonstrated the importance of the supernatural dimension of various cultural landscapes (Valk & Sävborg 2018).

The concepts of the dead and the Otherworld in a given culture can differ in terms of individual experiences as well as in relation to changes in general cultural worldviews. In Europe, the dominant Christian religion has gradually given way to secular non-religiosity as well as to a type of spirituality which is distinguished from Christianity (Tromp & Pless & Houtman 2020). The latter is often labelled as “New Age”, “post-Christian”, “alternative” or “holistic” (e. g., Heelas 1996; Heelas & Woodhead 2005; Houtman & Tromp 2021).<sup>1</sup> In this paper I consider spiritual ideas about the dead in the urban environment in Slovakia, a country with a predominantly Christian population, in relation to the transformation of cultural and religious worldviews which took place there in the 1990s. After the fall of communism in Central and Eastern Europe, the materialist and anti-religious orientation of the Marxist ideology that was the dominant official worldview during the socialist period was replaced by a plurality of religious and spiritual currents (Ališauskienė 2017; Smoczyński 2016). In Slovakia this was manifested in two ways: a return to traditional Christian forms of religiosity (especially Catholicism) and the spread of new ideas and practices (Tížik 2006). Since then, the popularity of the latter has been growing.<sup>2</sup>

During the transformation of the religious milieu, the people who had been born and grown into adulthood under socialism already had some ideas about the afterlife and the dead, both religious and secular. I will explore what various people who experienced the change of the political regime as adults and adopted new spiritual ideas think about the transformation of their worldviews, in particular in relation to the dead, and will focus on the role of the space where the living and the dead act and communicate.

I will present the preliminary results of the ethnographic research which I have carried out since 2023 in Bratislava, the capital of Slovakia. I argue that in the spiritual milieu the spatial aspect of the ideas about the dead and the afterlife has a significant moral dimension supported by the notion of the universal



spiritual energy connecting the living and the dead. I will also demonstrate that practitioners of various spiritual techniques reflect the influence of the political change in the 1990s on their spiritual experiences mainly in relation to new sources of information about spiritual teachings and opportunities for meeting people with similar interests.

In the first part of the paper, I will consider the conceptual tools which I employ to interpret the results of my fieldwork. Subsequently, I will investigate the ideas about the dead and the Otherworld presented by four interlocutors with different family background and spiritual views. In this, I will pay particular attention to spatiality. In conclusion, I will discuss the results in relation to relevant scholarly works.

## SPIRITUALITY, COSMOLOGY, AND DEATHSCAPES

The term “spirituality”, which is widely used in the public milieu, has proven to be difficult to define and operationalize from the scholarly perspective. As Dick Houtman and Paul Tromp (2021: 35) argue, the main reason is that it manifests itself in a myriad of different ways and social contexts, both within established religions and beyond. These scholars propose the Post-Christian Spirituality Scale consisting of seven logically interrelated ideas that they consider central to the spiritual worldviews in Europe: 1) Personal spirituality is more important than allegiance to a religious tradition; 2) Every person has a higher spiritual “self” that can be awakened and enlightened; 3) There is some sort of spirit or life force which permeates all life; 4) The divine does not originate outside, but within every person; 5) The one and only true religion does not exist, but there are truths that one can find in all religions of the world; 6) The cosmos is a living entity; 7) The entire universe springs from one universal spiritual energy (Houtman & Tromp 2021: 55). Therefore, despite the diversity of spiritual ideas, they share a common feature: the spiritual self “is conceived as laying hidden behind, beyond, or underneath the mundane self and it is believed to be intimately tied up with a universal force or energy... that holistically pervades and connects ‘all’, that is, nature, society, and the cosmos” (Houtman & Aupers 2010: 6). As Yael Keshet (2009, 2011) has noted, the concept of energy is also used as the embodiment of the intangible knowledge and serves as a linguistic bridge between spirituality and science, thus rationalizing and legitimizing spiritual ideas.

The notion of energy which is understood as an important characteristic of the spiritual or sacred sphere can be linked to the ideas of Mary Douglas (2001 [1966], 1996 [1970], 2003 [1992]) who continues Durkheim’s argument concerning the contagious nature of sacred things. According to her, in any society people create symbolic classifications of the world that determine “the normal” and “the right” in all domains of human life: “In all places at all times the universe is moralized and politicized” (Douglas 2003 [1992]: 5). She introduces

the notions of purity as a symbolic expression of this moral order and impurity indicating its violation. In the religious and spiritual sphere, these terms are linked to people's perception of what constitutes contamination and refer to the distinction between the sacred and the profane (Douglas 2001 [1966]: 21–22). Cosmology serves as a symbolic orientation schema which determines the assignment of things to their right place and helps people to relate to one another in time and space. The spatial aspect is particularly important: "The idea of society is a powerful image... This image has form; it has external boundaries, margins, internal structure. Its outlines contain power to reward conformity and repulse attack. There is energy in its margins and unstructured areas" (Douglas 2001 [1966]: 115). Things that people consider as anomalous and transgressive of normal bounds are denoted as "unclean". Thus, the notion of pollution indicates a violation of social norms and at the same time can signify a potentially dangerous, contagious sacred sphere.

Douglas's ideas about the construction of the symbolic order that includes spaces and places correspond to the approach to the study of human cognition that was introduced by Edwin Hutchins (2006) and referred to as "distributed cognition". It assumes that because humans live in constant interaction with their physical and social environments, cognitive processes are not confined to individuals' minds but are distributed across people, their physical surroundings and symbolic settings. Hutchins argues that there are three basic kinds of such interaction: interaction with social others, interaction with the material environment and interaction of the present with the past. I will interpret the individuals' accounts of their experiences with the dead along these lines.

First, these experiences refer to interactions with the dead as social others: in communication with the living the dead play a role of active social agents. Second, they involve interactions with the material environment, including physical objects as well as practices related to the dead. And finally, experiences with the dead involve interactions of the present with the past, as they are based on people's memories. In the context of my research, the last dimension is important not only in terms of memories of the dead, but also in relation to the change of the religious and spiritual milieu after the political changes in the 1990s: as I will demonstrate, my interlocutors' accounts reflect this change in terms of their ideas about the afterlife as well as practices linked to the dead.

Regarding interaction with social others and the material environment, I will also use the notion of *deathscape*, which I understand in accordance with Elisabeth Teather's (2001) definition as the material expression in the landscape of practices relating to death. As Heng (2020) observes, empirical studies on deathscapes have demonstrated that material objects can be both performative and communicative, becoming a channel of communication with the dead, and in deathscapes the dead or spirits have agency in the Latourian sense of the capacity to have effect and/or to influence the actions and interactions of individuals and events (Latour 2014) through material objects. Teather

also uses the broader concept of deathspace: deathscapes can be interpreted as a spatialisation of the social order, constituting a deathspace as a symbolic system in which “abstract structures such as ‘culture’ become concrete practices and arrangements in space” (Shields 1999: 155, as cited in Teather 2001: 197). Deathspaces are therefore “stages on which people play out their needs to express their beliefs and their acceptance of social responsibility in the context of what is tolerated by the institutions of the state” (Teather 2001: 197).

These theoretical considerations are useful for the interpretation of moral reasoning in the context of alternative spirituality. Ideas about the contagious sacred could be applied to the concept of spiritual energy. The notion of contamination can indicate contact with the Otherworld as well as the violation of moral order. Looking at the ethnographic data through these lenses, I will explore the role of space in my interlocutors’ statements and the deathscapes which include practices related to the dead. At the same time, I will pay attention to how they reflect the transformation of deathscapes after the political changes in the 1990s.

In Slovakia, in public spaces many spiritual circles are invisible, while some of them have become discernible via the media. In my paper, I will consider worldviews of people practicing neo-shamanism, which is based on re-interpretations of traditional healing practices coming from various cultures,<sup>3</sup> and Wicca, a neo-pagan syncretic nature-based religion.

I started fieldwork in September 2023. I participated in spiritual gatherings and conducted interviews with people who attend them as well as with those who do not participate in spiritual meetings but have adopted spiritual ideas, combining them with their original worldviews – Christian, atheistic, or other. In this paper, I concentrate on the ideas of interlocutors who were adults during the political changes in the 1990s.<sup>4</sup>

I present the results of analysis of accounts provided by four people with different family backgrounds and religious upbringing as well as different current spiritual views (see Table 1). Identification of their worldviews followed either from what these people explicitly declared (shamanism, Wicca) or from their statements regarding spirituality. The first person is a leader of a shamanic circle; the others are not leading figures in spiritual circles and adhere to broader spiritual views, combining different ideas in individual ways.<sup>5</sup>

**Table 1.** Interlocutors’ backgrounds and worldviews

Interlocutor	Family and upbringing	Current worldview
Robert	Catholic	shamanism and Slavic spirituality
Teresa	Catholic	shamanism and broader spirituality
Lena	non-religious, spiritual	Wicca and Slavic spirituality
Ela	non-religious	Wicca and broader spirituality

During my fieldwork, in all settings the topics of the dead and the after-life arose spontaneously, in line with a holistic view of the universe and the self that is characteristic of contemporary spirituality, although in individual accounts they were explained in different ways. In the next parts, I will consider 1) a spatial aspect of the interlocutors' descriptions of the Otherworld and their experiences with the dead; and 2) how the concept of energy is used in the practitioners' argumentation.

## ROBERT

Robert has been a regular attendant of FSS (Foundation for Shamanic Studies) seminars and events since the beginning of the 2000s. Later, he cooperated with a leader of the FSS branch in Slovakia and, in time, became an FSS lecturer, actively involved in the organisation of shamanic events. Aside from this, he practices spiritual healing through massage, having many clients.

Robert was born in Bratislava in the 1960s and was raised in a Catholic family. As a child, he attended religious services, but he says that he was forced to do it and did not enjoy going to church. He was more interested in science fiction and adventure literature and movies, especially those related to the traditions of the Indians of North America. Since childhood, he had considered himself a "strange" or "weird" person, different from other people, although he did not know why. That "strangeness" became definable after the fall of the communist regime, when he started to read spiritual literature and meet people with similar interests. Thus, Robert reflects the internalisation and development of his spiritual worldview in connection with the change of political regime. However, for him, it is not only about political discourse; he refers to the negative attitude of Christian authorities and Christian politics towards new forms of spirituality that marked the first decades of the post-socialist era. In general, the shamans that I met were very well aware of the typical Christian image of shamanism as the worship of spirits and demons; this made practicing shamanism problematic in the predominantly Christian environment (see Bužeková 2020). Importantly, Robert describes Christian practice as superficial and even hypocritical, although he tends to interpret some Christian rituals in spiritual terms in relation to Slavic cultural heritage that was absorbed by Christianity. He sees Slavic gods and ancestors in a strongly positive way, as moral spirits who can help Slovak people solve problems.

From the perspective of shamanism (traditional as well as urban), the dead play a principal role in lives of the living: they belong to the Otherworld, the world of spirits and ancestors, where shamans travel to ask for advice and to obtain spiritual knowledge. Referring to the inhabitants of the Otherworld, Robert frequently uses the aggregated categories of "beings" and "souls". They have their "right place" in the complex structure of the world which is divided into lower, middle and upper levels. Souls of the deceased should go to

the roots of the world tree, to the lower level which nourishes the middle and the upper worlds through its power. “Beings” include divine figures, spiritual teachers and ancestors. They can be found at the upper level, but ancestors can also dwell at the lower level.

The concept of the soul for Robert is a bridge between the notions of life and death; death from this perspective is just a transformation of the soul. In this, the moral dimension is apparent:

*Many of those thinkers say that the greatest fear of all is the fear of death. There is an allegory – fear of death is fear of being left alone. People focus on that fear and do not understand that it takes from them the dimension of love. Intention is the most important thing. If I nourish the good intention, then it is good, and if I don't, then what remains? Only bad things. I'm just saying that if people paid as much attention to their souls as they do to slandering others and themselves, like – how terrible I am because I can't do this... If we paid attention to the good, imagine, where would we be?*

In neo-shamanism the dead are important not only as ancestors represented in a rather general way, but also in terms of specific people, as many people come to shamanic seminars to cope with their grief or to contact the deceased. One of the principal FSS seminars is dedicated to death and dying. Its aim is “to work with the spirits of the deceased in a direct contact with them”, as Robert said, and “to help those souls who want to leave”. In November 2024 I attended this seminar, which was led by Robert. Space played the central role in how he presented “the psychopomp technique”, that is, a spiritual technique helping souls to go “to the other side”. In the beginning of their shamanic practice, each participant had to perform a ritual of shamanic journey in order to find a particular place from which they were supposed to travel to the Otherworld. During the seminar, they learnt to go from this place to the gates leading to the “in-between space” (*medzipriestor*), also called “in-between world” (*medzisvet*), where souls of the deceased stayed before they could proceed to the world of “beings” and ancestors (each participant was supposed to find their own gate). As Robert said at the seminar, souls of people who have done something wrong during their lifetime could stay in the “in-between world” for a long time period, even forever: they want to go to the other side, but they cannot until they solve unresolved issues. The aim of participants was to learn how to help these souls to get to their “right place”. Thus, the “topography of the Otherworld”, as Robert called this spatial scheme, was structured in accordance with moral assessment of the dead’s behaviour. At the same time, participants’ own behaviour was also understood in moral terms, as they were supposed to help the dead and to maintain the world order.

Remarkably, Robert describes souls as a form of energy and uses a term, “vibration”, which is specific for every individual. He represents the reciprocal interaction between the living and the dead in terms of spiritual energy which can convey the dead’s advice and messages to shamans and at the same time serves as a basis for the shamanic practice, for example, during shamanic dance when practitioners “connect to the energy of ancestors”. At the same time, he refers to the notion of “shamanic soul” or “energetic potential” which can be transferred from a deceased shaman to a living person who is chosen by the ancestors as a new shaman serving the community. The connection between the living and the dead can also be manifested by material objects, especially ritual objects which are very important in practicing shamanism. For example, recently Robert got a gift from a member of the shamanic circle – a new drum which this person designed in accordance with his vision. Robert interpreted this design in relation to his grandfather and emphasised the importance of the link between him and his ancestor.

The concepts of right and wrong in relation to the dead are important during the triduum of All Souls’ Day, All Saints’ Eve and All Saints’ Day, which is called *Dušičky* (Little Souls) in Slovakia.<sup>6</sup> Robert observes associated Christian customs, which he adopted during his childhood, such as going to a cemetery and lighting candles, but he interprets them in spiritual terms in relation to the traditional Slovak concept of *stridžie dni* (witches’ days) and *Morena*, a figure of Slavic folklore that has been interpreted as a transformed image of the goddess of the Underworld by practitioners and scholars (e.g., Toporov 1993: 211). During this time some beings or “demonic forces” of the Otherworld can get to the wrong place – the world of the living – and can harm people:

*The gate to the Otherworld is open then, and those beings, even those that we don’t need here, are able to move around. When the darkness has more power, they can stick to people and work with them.*

Notably, “demonic forces” which get to the world of the living are represented as contamination, something that “sticks” to people. Robert’s stories about spirits of deceased people who got stuck between the two worlds also refer to pollution. These souls are contaminated by their wrong deeds, and this contamination should be “cleaned”:

*Some of them are still here, they are still cleansing themselves in some way, they still want to pass on something and say something or reconcile with somebody that they’ve done wrong to, so they go to them directly and ask them to forgive them if they’ve done something in that life that they didn’t have time to atone for in their lifetime.*



Moreover, the presence of such souls contaminates physical surroundings, and this also should be cleaned. For example, Robert described how he helped his friend who was troubled by a soul of a deceased owner of an apartment where this friend lived. This soul was scattering garbage, unexpectedly turning off a light or a computer, or moving things around – in general, causing a mess. When people contact Robert with similar problems, he performs a ritual called “cleaning”, during which he removes negative energy by sending souls of the deceased who are causing troubles to the other side. In this particular case, the soul of the owner appeared to Robert and explained the reasons of his behaviour, which Robert then communicated to his friend and advised her how to resolve this issue.

To summarize, in Robert’s accounts the places where the living and the dead interact are diverse: they include home settings, places of shamanic meetings and cemeteries. Robert stresses the moral dimension of this interaction linked to the notion of spiritual energy that pervades the universe and connects the living and the dead – in terms of interaction as well as inheritance of a certain “potential” or “vibration”. The concept of energy is also important in relation to the contagious nature of forces from the Otherworld or souls of the deceased who did not get to their “right place”. And finally, material objects convey the presence of the dead in the ritual settings as well as in cases of unwanted presence of souls that are “stuck” in the world of the living.

## TERESA

Teresa recently started to attend shamanic seminars organised by Robert. She is a businesswoman with many interests other than business, such as art and organising cultural events. Attending spiritual meetings is a new activity for her, although she characterises herself as a spiritual person.

Teresa was born into a working-class family in 1961 and lives in her native city in northern Slovakia. Her grandparents on her father’s side were ardent communists and therefore atheists, but her mother was a Catholic. Teresa was therefore baptised and brought up as a Catholic, although her family was not actively observant and only seldom attended church services. However, she had a course on religion (Catholic Christianity) for her first two years at school. The course was part of the official school curriculum, but it was taught by Catholic nuns and a priest. This combination of socialist and religious education was possible, as it was the time of political reforms in Czechoslovakia aimed at the liberalisation of the socialist society. Teresa does not have fond memories of her religious education, as the nuns would beat the children if they did not behave. Teresa received her first communion, but after the change of the political atmosphere due to the invasion of Czechoslovakia by the Soviet Army in 1968 the situation regarding religious activities worsened. When her confirmation was approaching, the children at her school were practicing for

the Spartakiad,<sup>7</sup> and the teachers pressed them to choose between receiving their holy confirmation and participating in this sporting event supported by the regime. Those who chose confirmation would have had problems at school. Teresa went to Prague to participate in the Spartakiad.

During the following period, practices related to the dead were the main religious activity in Teresa's family. Aside from observing customs associated with the main Christian holidays (Christmas, Easter, and Dušičky), they attended church mainly on the occasion of funerals. The atheistic orientation of Teresa's family from her father's side, however, had an impact on this practice as some of her family members refused to attend church services related to funerals. Teresa's father died when she was six years old, and that was a trauma which influenced her entire life. The turning point was when her mother remarried and gave birth to Teresa's sister, paying the baby much more attention than her older daughter. Thus, Teresa became "the second child" and started clinging to memories of her father:

*And I felt that I missed him terribly. They told me that my father was so good, cheerful, a musician, an artist, and I also am an artist... All I have are photos. I look a lot like him. And my character is similar, too, from what everyone says... so, it was like we were a twosome. When I left home, I got married. But when my son was two years old, I got divorced and lived alone in a two-bedroom apartment. A young 22-year-old girl. I always kept the doors locked and always had everything under control. Well, one day I left the door open, and I fell asleep. And suddenly, I woke up to a person standing in the doorway. He was telling me: Teresa, you're so big already, and you've already got son... And I was looking at him from his head to his toe. What his shirt was like, his tie, his shoes, how his hair was, how he had everything. And he was telling me not to worry, that he would always be there for me. And I was telling him – where have you been so far, you know how sad I am, and I was crying. And he just stood there and smiled. And when I woke up in the morning, I was crying, tears were pouring out of my eyes. But some part of me opened and I started to communicate with him. And that's still going on to this day. Of course, I told my mom about that, and she was crying because when I described that tie to her, she said that's how we put it in the grave. So I saw him exactly as he was when he left.*

That experience was only the beginning: since then, Teresa has been communicating regularly with her father, but also with other dead family members who protect her and help her. Remarkably, this communication is connected to a certain place: she sees him in the right corner of her room together with other family members, including her grandparents. Teresa feels their presence and

“energy” all the time as a powerful protection. She interprets the right corner of her room as a projection of the Otherworld, which she now visits regularly in order to interact with her dead family members. Her journeys take place “in mind”, through spiritual energy. She moves along the vertical axis, which represents the spiritual dimension, by using an elevator that takes her to the “fifth dimension”. There, she meets her family and asks them for advice.

These family members are staying at their right place – the Otherworld. However, there are also people who stay in the world of the living due to unresolved moral issues, such as Teresa’s mother-in-law whom she perceives as a hypocrite. Her soul appeared to Teresa’s son in a vision: she was standing on the bank of the river dividing the world of the living and the Otherworld and didn’t want to cross over, “because she knew what was waiting for her”, as Teresa said. Teresa also experienced an encounter with a deceased “evil woman”, who stayed between the two worlds. It was the wife of her uncle and godfather; she did not take care of Teresa when she was a child. When this woman died, she tried to hurt Teresa:

*When I woke up that night, she was sitting on top of me and strangling me. And I was smiling in her face because she didn't have the strength anymore. I understood then that haunting can't come at you if you're strong and protected. I saw them [her protective family members] in that corner, and she held me around my neck, and I was smiling at her. She just flew away and ever since then I see her buried in the ground.*

Teresa ascribes her spiritual transformation to the experience with her deceased father, but the political and religious changes in the 1990s also play an important role in her account. It was the time when she started to learn various spiritual teachings and recognised her special abilities. As she said, “an awful lot of things opened up then and started jumping out at people”. She started to participate in spiritual events and met people with various spiritual interests. She was aware of the diversity of spiritual teachings and selected from them on the basis of her intuition – she realized then that she had abilities to recognize ideas and practices that were “proper” for her.

Reading spiritual books and practicing meditation helped Teresa find answers to the questions she had about her life. The main questions were about her family, in particular her father. In general, the central role in her spiritual transformation was played by the dead and the practices related to them, such as funerals. On these occasions Teresa compared her religious background with these new ideas, and this comparison was not in favour of Christianity.

The moral aspect of Teresa’s accounts corresponds to the spiritual view in which people have obligations towards the universe, and bad behaviour has consequences:

*I think after we die, we leave the body here. I think the soul goes somewhere higher. I think that we as souls have a certain task in life. We're going to do the job and either you do it or you don't do it and you go again... I don't know what it's called, whether it's karma or whatever it is, but I know that those who do evil and have those evil souls and those evil intentions and do harm on purpose, it doesn't matter who or what, even animals, it comes back to them incredibly.*

In terms of deathscapes, Teresa can interact with the dead at any place. Cemeteries, however, are not proper places for that, as the dead communicate with her every day on various occasions through her mind. They often contact her spontaneously or she contacts them through meditation. Or, rather, as she said, “I do not contact them, they’re just there”. She uses material objects to commemorate the dead, but they are not that important, as she perceives their presence rather through her mind. Although Teresa and her family used to attend church funerals and observe the tradition associated with Dušičky, she sees these practices merely as customs and as something that her dead relatives would expect from her. This behaviour corresponds to the idea of reciprocal interaction between the living and the dead: the dead help and protect Teresa, and she observes customs and rituals which are supposed to oblige them. Unlike Robert, however, Teresa pays more attention to concrete persons, to her family, and seldom mentions such general concepts as “souls” or “spirits”.

## LENA

Lena is a regular attendant of Wicca events and the school of natural magic organised by Samuel, a high priest of the Wicca circle (see Bužeková 2024), but she has her own spiritual practice which includes spiritual consulting and healing courses. Before the COVID-19 pandemic she worked at the Norbekov Center in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, which offers healing courses to improve eyesight and restore overall physical and mental health.<sup>8</sup> Since the pandemic she has been employed by Samuel in his magic shop.

Lena was born in Moscow in the 1970s into an ethnically mixed family – her father was Russian and her mother was Slovak. After finishing secondary school, she moved to Bratislava with her family. She and her three sisters did not have a religious upbringing: they did not go to church and did not receive any religious education. Despite this, Lena sees her childhood and youth as having been spiritual, due to all three sisters’ special abilities (seeing auras and clairvoyance), but also due to reading classic Russian literature. According to her, the changes in the 1990s only broadened the range of external sources of information about spirituality, especially literature, but did not cause a decisive transformation of her spiritual life.

Basically, Lena is a “solitary” who does not need a group to fit in. Although she considers any spiritual practice to be potentially useful, she is drawn to the Slavic cultural heritage, *slovanstvo*, because she perceives it as her roots and as the original form of spirituality. She calls herself a *čarovnica* which she considers as a Slavic term for a woman who practices magic. She is involved in the activities of Rodosvet, a “spiritual academy” which promotes “old Slavic tribal spiritual knowledge, teachings, beliefs, traditions, ceremonies, [and] customs”.<sup>9</sup> She also works with Russian and Ukrainian spiritual teachers such as Vladimir Kurovsky.<sup>10</sup> Despite her respect for Samuel, she does not agree with him on the question of the authenticity of spirituality:

*I never identified as Wiccan or anything. Magic is one, we all know that. Here, that coherent tradition is really preserved in Wicca, in part thanks to Samuel, that he brought it here and carries that knowledge all the time... Slavs lived in harmony with nature and spirituality. Even according to history, and Samuel doesn't like it when I tell him, basically all of Wicca has Slavic foundations. Well, he doesn't like it very much. But the Slavs really lived all the way across Europe, all the way back in England. It's even claimed that King Arthur was a Slav.*

The dead play an important role in Lena's worldview: she sees ancestors as part of any society, as teachers and guardians of spiritual knowledge. This is similar to Robert's view, although she places a greater emphasis on Slavic heritage. Sometimes Lena also refers to shamanism as a term synonymous with magic, and her dealings with the dead are similar to shamanic rituals. Her central concept associated with the dead is the “soul”, in the sense of spiritual energy. This view defines the deathscapes – the places and practices associated with the dead. Cemeteries play an important role in Lena's reasoning about these practices. In November 2023 I attended together with Lena a Wicca seminar dedicated to the communication with the dead. Participants were encouraged to create altars of ancestors at their homes and to go to the graves to commemorate deceased family members. Lena, however, perceives the latter practice as disturbing to the dead. As she explained, she has been “a big believer in carrying our loved ones in our hearts”. When she wants to commemorate the deceased, she does it at home: she puts up their pictures, makes an altar, or lights a candle.

In addition, Lena always takes a “visitor” home from the cemetery – some soul that wants to communicate with her; then she must send this soul to its right place. She is able to do this due to the special abilities that she developed during her childhood: she can see what others cannot, she is frequently contacted by the dead, and she can help them. The souls are a form of energy that can live in traces in the physical environment:

*I still feel those souls walking behind me. That curtain [between the world of living and the Otherworld] is really just a gentle breeze, or rather there's hardly any boundary at all. That's why people should be careful where they walk because anybody can walk through that gate. [...] They [souls] come. I see them, I feel their energy. And when I pass by the cemetery, I get home, and I can just see the shadows. Or there are some roads where I don't like to go, for example, there was a battlefield, or a place where some tragedy happened. That's how I experience it. Or you're driving in the car and suddenly somebody is sitting next to you (laughs). [...] My perception is that these souls are stuck here and either they don't understand that they must cross over to the other side, or something is keeping them here. I have to help them, just point them in the direction where they have to go, send them back through that portal and just wait for them there. This pilgrimage of theirs is then over. They go where they belong.*

Thus, similarly to Robert, Lena helps the souls of the dead, who are kept in the world of the living by some unresolved issues, to get to their right place in the universe – to the Otherworld; and the interaction between the living and the dead is also presented as reciprocal, as ancestors are supposed to help and advise people. Lena's view of the right place for the dead is somewhat different from Robert's view: it is not at the roots of the world tree, but a light understood as a form of the spiritual energy that permeates the universe. The places where the living and the dead interact include home settings or any setting where the contact between them takes place; but cemeteries are not proper places. The graves keeping the material remains of the deceased are not supposed to be visited, but material objects evoking memories play an important role in communication with the dead.

## ELA

Ela is also a regular attendant of Wicca events and the school of natural magic, and she also has her own spiritual practice – spiritual consulting and courses on mandalas. Outside of her spiritual activities, she worked at an IT company for many years and then established a business as an accountant.

Ela was born in Bratislava at the end of the 1970s and characterises herself as a child of the socialist era. When she was born, her parents were students influenced by hippie ideas, but her grandfather on her father's side was a high government official and a respected professor at the faculty of civil engineering. Because of his position his children could not be baptized, and neither Ela nor her parents received any religious education. As Ela said, it was extremely good for her, because she was not influenced by that sphere. In addition, she was not influenced by any adult until she was three years old, because her parents were



studying, and she lived in a *koliba* (isolated cottage in the hills) with her grandmother who was very hard of hearing. After that her mother became mentally ill and Ela moved to her grandfather's house in Bratislava. Because she was not socialised in a standard way and did not adjust her reactions to "proper" behaviour, her family viewed her as a problematic child, as "crazy" or "traumatized" by her mother's illness. Ela, however, interprets her "wild" behaviour and visions during childhood as manifestations of her special spiritual abilities, which she started to recognize only after the political changes in the 1990s. She began to read spiritual literature and meet people who were "doing spiritual things". As she said, "that was such an opening for me – to study and hone those skills. And the fact that other people have it the way I have it".

Ela's worldview is not bounded by any fixed ideas shared in a group; although she identifies as a *čarodejnica* (the Slovak word for witch) and accepts some Wiccan ideas, she perceives witchcraft as a free practice in which she can use any suitable spiritual technique. Unlike Lena and Robert, Ela is not inclined towards Slavic spiritual heritage. She is instead oriented towards Eastern spiritual concepts, especially Tibetan, which she adopted from books given her by her grandfather after the fall of the communist regime.

With her special abilities, Ela has had experiences with the dead since her childhood:

*I didn't understand why people were crying when someone died. Because the soul was talking to me in such a... happy way! I just perceived that person as a light. They were smiling. They already had that feeling of happiness. Everybody around was crying, and I didn't understand why. Because I wanted to smile like a child. And of course, after a couple of these situations... they saw it as bad behaviour, and I couldn't go to funerals anymore. They just didn't call me. I never understood why they go there crying and why they're in black. Because to me the dead were lights.*

In her descriptions of the souls of the deceased Ela, like Lena, uses the word "light". In relation to the living beings' energy her usual expression is "aura", and she pays special attention to its colours – an important topic in her spiritual practice. However, she also perceives the energy of the living and the dead through smell. Her most emotional experience in this respect was her mother's death: it was her first encounter with the smell of death. She also feels a similar smell in the presence of people who are at the end of their life and have little life energy; and she sees their aura as small.

Energy also plays the central role in Ela's interaction with her dead female relatives. Motherhood and womanhood are central notions in Wicca, as well as in other spiritual currents based on the ideas of witchcraft and magic, and Ela's perception of her mother corresponds to this view. Despite her relatively little

influence during Ela's childhood, she has played an important role in her life, but not as an individual – she appears to Ela during spiritual practice together with Ela's two grandmothers:

*When I'm in big trouble or need to make a decision, or my soul feels that I'm about to be hurt or something is about to happen, they advise me: don't do this, do this, or if I just need help, they determine my path. They give me kind of consultation to direct the energy... I see them as an image: there is a fire in the centre, a hearth, and they are sitting ceremoniously in their places, and I am in the circle. Sometimes I just sit quietly and they do some ceremony, which I then apply in my healing, or some other thing, which I learn and practice further. Or when I'm right in front of them, in front of the main ones, I get some message. That message is either an image or a word.*

In Ela's accounts the cemetery does not play a central role in the commemoration of the dead: she states that she does not need to go there and put candles on graves because there had been a change: a soul left and what remains in the ground is not the deceased person. Besides, she does not like to go to the cemetery, because at the cemetery she sees "creeping masses" or "entities" waving around graves which are not souls but some fragments of their energy "that remains there, that can't detach itself from the material, and it creeps in there".

In Ela's case the deathscapes include, first of all, home settings, where material things are central. She emphasises the inheritance of habits through which she interacts with her grandmothers, such as making their favourite food, using their favourite dishes, or reading books that they liked. One of Ela's most important practices related to the dead is telling stories about them to her children. This is what people are supposed to do and what her children are supposed to do when she dies – she hopes that they will remember her in this respectful way, but she does not want them to be sad. Material objects convey the presence of Ela's dead female relatives not only in commemoration, but also in her spiritual practice. For example, she inherited from her grandmother a broom and a pot, and that are for her "the most powerful witch's tools", as she believes that her grandmother "really used to fly on that broom".

Ela's image of the Otherworld includes the idea of a boundary between the two worlds expressed in moral terms, although it is somewhat different from Robert's, Teresa's and Lena's representations:

*When the dead contact people, it always because of unresolved issues. Sometimes it happens because they want to protect a person... For me, a boundary [between the two worlds] is just a different perception. I just switch that perception, I stop perceiving the body, the material part, our reality. When one is communicating with*

*spirits, the boundary always must be closed afterwards, otherwise one gets those entities and even evil ones come here and get hold of one's throat and then hold on and do wrong. So one always has to draw that curtain. When I'm consciously asking something or communicating with spirit because I need help, I always close it.*

To summarize, the interaction between the living and the dead is reciprocal: deceased relatives are helpful for Ela and her family; they still influence her life and help her to make decisions. On the other side, the dead are regularly commemorated and honoured. Material objects belonging to them play an important role in commemoration as well as in Ela's spiritual practice. The moral dimension of interaction between the living and the dead is also strongly manifested through the idea of practicing magic: Ela's activities are supposed to heal and help people, and the dead direct and advise her in this beneficial work.

## CONCLUSION

I conclude that my interlocutors' accounts of their experiences with the dead display a tendency to connect ideas coming from various spiritual teachings. This seemingly corresponds to a view of alternative spirituality as a "pick-and-mix religion" (Hamilton 2000) or a "spiritual supermarket" (Lyon 2000): it has been argued that most participants in the spiritual milieu draw upon multiple traditions, styles and ideas simultaneously, combining them into idiosyncratic packages. This argument follows the influential idea of Thomas Luckmann (1967) who viewed New Age as a market of religious elements, from which individual "seekers" could pick and choose freely. However, as Olav Hammer (2010: 52) states, like any other worldview, alternative spiritual concepts "do not originate in the minds of free-floating, autonomous individuals, but are produced by historically situated people".

In the case of my interlocutors, their choice of spiritual practices has been influenced by the specifics of their upbringing and current situation. After the change of the political regime, the influx of new forms of spirituality broadened their views and knowledge and they started to develop their spiritual abilities. People with Catholic backgrounds had to reconcile their original confessional faith with new forms of spirituality: Robert and Teresa, who perceived their childhood religious experiences in a negative light, turned away from Christianity. Robert's initial choice of the shamanic practice was influenced by his fascination with cultures of American Indians during his childhood and youth, but his current interest in the Slavic spiritual heritage corresponds to the present situation in Slavic-speaking countries of Central Europe – it has been argued that the rise of neo-pagan movements in this region manifests specific contemporary forms of Pan-Slavism, not necessarily expressed in political terms (Čejka & Suslov & Đorđević 2023). Lena with her upbringing in

Russia displays even stronger interest in Slavic traditions: she is engaged in Slavic spiritual organisations; and she tends to interpret any spiritual practice in Slavic terms. Ela's interest in the Tibetan spiritual tradition was initiated by books given to her by her grandfather, but in general she prefers freedom of choice that corresponds to her "untamed" childhood. Teresa's turn to spiritual practice was caused by her experience with her dead father with whom she has identified since her childhood; and her tendency to try various techniques follows from her desire to find the most relevant answers to questions posed by her family life.

Despite the diversity of my interlocutors' experiences with the dead, all of them demonstrate the significant impact of the dead on their lives in two related spheres: the family context (deceased relatives) and their general worldview. Looking at their conceptualisations of the dead through the lenses of distributed cognition, I can conclude that my interlocutors' accounts reflect the constant interactions between the living and the dead: interactions with the dead as social others, interactions with the material environment and interactions of the present with the past. All three kinds of interaction are manifested through spatiality and involve the notion of the spiritual energy.

First, in communication with the living the dead play a role of active social agents. They can be presented as a collective category or as individual people. Both categories exist in two forms: 1) as part of a community inhabiting their right place in the universe, which is separate from the place inhabited by the living; and 2) as energies/entities/persons that get stuck in the world of the living. Interaction with the material environment is also expressed in spatial terms: practices related to the dead as well as physical objects are linked to certain places. And finally, interactions of the present with the past include people's memories of the dead as well as their reflections on the change of the religious and spiritual milieu after the political changes in the 1990s, in particular in terms of practices linked to the dead.

The main aspect of the agency of the dead is the "energy" that influences people's feelings and senses. Importantly, it allows reciprocal interaction of the two worlds and produces a feeling of the continual presence of the dead in the lives of the living which has a significant moral aspect. The connection between the concept of energy and moral behaviour can be connected to the idea of individual spirituality characteristic of alternative spiritual currents. As Galina Lindquist (2004) argues, the holistic worldview represents human beings as participating in the functioning of the universal cobweb as one of the forms of existence which contribute to its prosperity; this view corresponds to the political ideals of educated urban participants: egalitarian social order, citizens' engagement, ecological lifestyle, individualism and free choice. From this point of view, individuals are supposed to contribute to the general transformation of the world, because the development of the self is perceived as work

on both an individual and a global level. Indeed, my interlocutors expressed the idea of one's responsibility for their moral intentions and actions.

A moral dimension of the deathscapes present in my interlocutors' accounts is manifested through the spatial division of the world of the living and the Otherworld, which parallels Douglas' idea of cosmology as the moral order. The dead situated in the right place are benefactors: they protect the living and advise them. If the dead stay or get stuck in the world of the living (the wrong place for them), this is caused by unresolved moral issues: problems, guilt and atonement, a wish to help the living with certain problems, etc. This moral categorisation corresponds to numerous studies demonstrating how the violation of moral norms by deceased persons is linked to the negative impact of the agency of the dead on the lives of the living. In folklore studies, these findings refer to the traditional figures of revenants; in anthropology, exploration of such impact led to the emergence of the special field of hauntology (Good & Chioventa & Rahimi 2022).

Physical surroundings are important in the interaction between the living and the dead for all my interlocutors, albeit in different ways. For people who turned away from Christianity or did not have religious education, the meaning of the cemetery – the traditional Christian place of commemoration – is different from the traditional view: the tradition is upheld, but only as a matter of custom, and the cemetery can even be avoided when perceived as a location of souls or energy stuck in this world. This tendency as well as the idea of the Otherworld “forces” or souls that can stick to the living can be related to Douglas' concept of contamination and the contagious nature of the sacred sphere.

The forms of communication with the dead in private settings, on the other hand, have been transformed and expanded. Instead of the praying for the dead characteristic of Christian households, people who adhere to alternative forms of spirituality perform various rituals, meditate and interact with the dead by means of material objects, including altars, or through habitual activities. Material objects provide the link between the living and the dead, supporting and enhancing their interaction. The tendency to use the residual belongings of the dead to evoke memories has been widely explored in anthropological and historical studies that revealed the importance of material objects in experiences of grief, mourning and memorializing (Hallam & Hockey 2020). Ethnographies of alternative spirituality have also pointed to the importance of the use of various material objects in spiritual and religious practice (e.g., Castellanos 2021); that could be interpreted as the material agency (Teidearu 2023; Kumar 2024) or as the manifestation of the agency of the dead (Heng 2020).

Material objects can also serve as a manifestation of the agency of the dead in a different way: actions of the dead who are stuck in the world of the living can have material impacts, such as causing inanimate objects to move. This representation points to the moral dimension of deathscapes and, again, can be interpreted in relation to Douglas' concept of contamination in terms of

violation of moral norms. In the context of cognitive studies, as Richard Heersmink (2017) argues, the way in which artifacts are used in moral practice can be explored in connection with the perspective of distributed cognition with distributed morality theory. From the perspective of distributed cognition, humans make material patterns into representations by enacting their meanings (Hutchins 2010). In cognitive and evolutionary studies, this tendency has been explained by human evolution that has always been inextricably linked with the material forms people make: as Lambros Malafouris (2018) states, human beings are not merely embedded in a rich and changing universe of things; rather, human cognitive and social life is a process genuinely mediated and often constituted by them. Thus, the role of material objects in interactions between the living and the dead is always linked to how “the universe is moralized” (Douglas 2003 [1992]: 5). In the context of alternative spirituality, this “moralization” is expressed by the notion of energy.

To conclude, the common feature of all individual accounts is the interconnection of spatiality with the concepts of right and wrong behaviour – both of the living and of the dead. Ideas of practitioners of alternative spirituality differ and correspond to different ways of upbringing and current views, but nevertheless all of them point to the same idea: the dead are part of society, united with the living by the universal spiritual energy.

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#### NOTES

- 1 According to Steven Sutcliffe and Marion Bowman (2000: 2), contemporary spiritual currents “invariably understand themselves to be ‘alternative’, either strongly (they are explicitly dissenting) or weakly (they are merely variant or optional)” to dominant ideas and structures of “official” religion as well as secular science, and for this reason, the loose category of “alternative spirituality” is appropriate. In my account, I will primarily use this term.
- 2 The most recent census in Slovakia (Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic 2021) showed that the number of people belonging to the large churches has fallen and the number of non-religious people has risen significantly. The number of residents who affiliate with Roman Catholic religion is the highest (3.04 million): it is up to 55.8% of the whole population. However, in comparison with the previous census in 2011 their number and proportion decreased by more than six percentage points, representing more than 308 700 people. The second most numerous group (almost 1.3 million) is the population with no religious affiliation. Its proportion increased from 13.4% in 2011 to 23.8% in 2021. This change does not necessarily point to an increase in non-believers but can indicate the increasing popularity of “unchurched spiritualities” (Watts 2022) and can be linked to a growing percentage of people in the world who identify as spiritual but not religious (SBNR, see Fuller 2001; Wixwat & Saucier 2021). In addition, 4007 residents affiliate with a new census category “Paganism and natural spirituality”.



- 3 The main role in the formation of neo-shamanic groups in Slovakia in the early 1990s was played by the European branch of the Foundation for Shamanic Studies (hereinafter referred to as the FSS), located in Vienna (Bužeková 2012, 2017). I became familiar with this milieu in Bratislava in 2004 and carried out ethnographic research there in 2009–2011. Since then, I have been in contact with several people practicing shamanism in various forms.
- 4 So far, I have conducted repeated in-depth interviews with 13 interlocutors of corresponding age (those who experienced the change of the political regime as adults) and 5 participant observations of meetings of the spiritual circles. In this paper I present the results of the inductive analysis of 8 interviews with 4 interlocutors. I coded the data using emic categories. The excerpts from the interviews which are presented in this paper were translated by me.
- 5 The names of my interlocutors are pseudonymized. I present here mostly women's accounts; this aspect is a result of the complex gender dynamic of spiritual circles. The empirical research has demonstrated the prevalence of women on the spiritual scene all over the world (Keshet & Simchai 2014). During my previous as well as present research on spiritual gatherings I met women in all age categories, and my previous research pointed to a process of stratification of spiritual groups in which men can gradually replace women in leading positions (Bužeková 2014). In this paper I will not pay attention to the gender aspect, as this topic deserves special consideration.
- 6 In a narrow sense, this term refers to a day which is a state holiday, officially called "Pamiatka zosnulých", that is, Remembrance of the Dead, celebrated on 2 November. For more about this holiday in the context of alternative spirituality see Bužeková 2024.
- 7 The Spartakiads were mass gymnastics events designed to celebrate the Red Army's liberation of Czechoslovakia in 1945. The name refers to the 1921 Prague Spartakiad organised by the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (Roubal 2019).
- 8 Mirzakarim Sanakulovich Norbekov is a teacher of alternative medicine originally from Uzbekistan, known mainly in the countries of the former Soviet Union. He has written several bestselling books explaining how to feel happy and live a healthy life, and encouraging patients to take an active role in treating their illnesses (see Centrum Norbekova v ČR a SR, <https://www.norbekov.cz/>).
- 9 See Rodosvet Académia, <https://akademiarodosvet.webnode.sk/>.
- 10 Kurovsky is "the highest *volchv* [Slavic sorcerer or priest] of the outer circle of the ancestral hearth of the traditional Slavic spiritual school", teaching *ведическое славянство* – Vedic Slavic tradition and spirituality, including meditation techniques, positive psychology, and martial arts (see Kurovsky).

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# Comforting Dreamscapes: Exploring the Agency of the Dead through Dreams among Spiritual People in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina

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**Abstract:** The article examines how spiritual people in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina experience the agency of dead significant others through dreams. Many anthropologists have shown that dreams of the dead are understood as communication between the divine and human worlds, or between the dead and the living, and are thus perceived as particularly important. This study examines how ideas about the afterlife among spiritual people in Sarajevo shape the understanding of those dreams and how, in turn, dreams can also influence the individual's understanding of the afterlife. It shows that while spiritual interpretative frameworks dominate in the understanding of these dreams, Islamic and psychoanalytic perspectives are also occasionally applied. Accounts from interlocutors reveal that the appearance and emotional state of the people in these dreams, as well as the messages they convey, can play a significant role in their influence on the living. Furthermore, the paper shows that due to the generally positive view of the afterlife characteristic of alternative spirituality, the dead appearing in dreams of spiritual people in Sarajevo

predominantly have a comforting agency, providing reassurance, a sense of support, gratitude and a feeling of continuing bonds with their deceased loved ones.

**Keywords:** afterlife, dreams, the dead, alternative spirituality, continuing bonds, Sarajevo Bosnia and Herzegovina

## INTRODUCTION

Dreams have inspired diverse and conflicting ideas and understandings throughout the history of humankind. While in ancient Egypt, Rome and Greece they were understood as prophecies and supernatural visitations, Aristotle and his followers saw dreams as expressions of personal thoughts, desires, experiences and anxieties. According to the anthropologist Charles Stewart, these two conceptualizations continued to fluctuate in Western ideas about dreams for the next 1500 years. The distinction between reality and fantasy was not clearly delineated until the Enlightenment, after which dreams lost much of their cultural relevance, with the exception of some fields that emerged later, such as psychoanalysis (Stewart 1996: 165; see also Gregor 1996: 361; Laughlin & Rock 2014: 235–236). However, dreams have diverse roles, meanings and importance in different societies, and Annikki Kaivola-Bregenhøj (1993: 211) distinguishes between cultures where dreams are considered less, equally or more important in comparison to the occurrences experienced in waking states.

A particular form of dreams, which I will examine in this article, is dreams about the dead.<sup>1</sup> I will analyze the experiences and understandings of those among spiritual people in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina. My research questions are: How do my interlocutors understand their dreams of the dead significant others? Which interpretative frameworks do they use to make sense of these dreams – religious or atheist worldviews they were raised in, or spiritual perspectives they have adopted? What enables the dead in dreams to have an agency over the living? How do my interlocutors experience this encounter?

Anthropologists have observed that in many cultures, dreams are regarded as a form of communication between the divine and human worlds, while dreams of the dead are often interpreted as communication with the dead (see Bourguignon 2003: 136; Kempf & Hermann 2003; Kiliánová 2010: 17; Mageo 2003: 16; Mittermaier 2011: 6; Mittermaier 2012; Hesz 2012; Đorđević Belić 2024).<sup>2</sup> Similarly to other research, my interlocutors often understood the appearance of the dead in dreams as ontologically real and thus as an actual contact between their soul and the soul of the deceased. That was the case when dreams of the dead were pleasant and marked by a sense of closeness with the deceased. In contrast, bad dreams of the dead or those lacking a felt sense of



connection were more often explained by my interlocutors through psychoanalytic concepts. Thus, they understood these dreams as manifestations of their subconscious, rather than actual contact with the souls of the dead. Apart from spiritual and psychoanalytical frameworks, an Islamic understanding was also occasionally applied.

The spiritual interpretative framework – that was predominantly used – was composed of various spiritual ideas that my interlocutors found and accepted on their spiritual path. In line with alternative spirituality, which emphasizes personal experience and searching for answers inside the self rather than following external authority (Heelas & Woodhead 2005: 29, 78; Heelas 2008: 5–40; Bužeková 2024), they relied on their intuition and the emotions experienced in the dream rather than consulting dream interpretation manuals or authoritative figures. However, as is common in alternative spirituality, where people seek and combine ideas from various traditions in what has been termed a “spiritual supermarket” (Lyon 2000), my interlocutors’ ideas about the afterlife, and consequently about the dreams of the dead, were rarely based on a particular doctrine, but were rather constructed through an eclectic mix of perspectives.

In the article, I will first present my interlocutors and my research methodology. I will then discuss how ideas about the afterlife and dream interpretations of spiritual people are intertwined as the afterlife turned out to be an important factor that shaped the dream interpretation by spiritual people, and vice versa – dreams influenced interlocutors’ ideas about the afterlife. Subsequently, I will show that my interlocutors relied on their own feelings and intuition in understanding the dreams, rather than following a particular authority or relying on dream interpretation manuals. I will also specify how my interlocutors distinguish between dreams that are ontologically real and those that are thought to be caused by psychological states and processes of the individual. Finally, I will discuss my interlocutors’ experiences of the dead in dreams and argue that the appearance and emotional state of the dead in these dreams, as well as the messages they convey, can play an essential role in the impact they have on the living. Those, I claim, correspond to my interlocutors’ ideas of the afterlife.

## METHODOLOGY

I conducted fieldwork in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, from February to May 2024. I carried out forty-nine semi-structured recorded interviews with a total of fifty interlocutors.<sup>3</sup> In most cases, I conducted only a single interview with each participant, except for one instance where I conducted a follow-up interview. A few interviews included two participants. The majority of my interlocutors were women (thirty-seven),<sup>4</sup> though I made an effort to include men as well (thirteen). The age range of the participants was thirty to seventy-

two, with most falling between thirty and fifty years old. Most of my interlocutors were highly educated – at least thirty-three of them had university degrees. I estimate the majority of my interlocutors' socioeconomic status as above average for Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Additionally, I carried out participant observations at various gatherings and workshops of different spiritual groups. I attended several shamanic<sup>5</sup> workshops, yoga and meditation courses, spiritual group meetings, family constellation<sup>6</sup> workshops, and one reflexotherapy workshop. Before each event I explained the purpose of my research to the group leader and asked if I could attend. At the beginning of each gathering, I introduced my research to the participants and asked if everyone was comfortable with me participating in the event. I also took the opportunity to ask if anyone was interested in participating in an interview. As a result, some of my interlocutors were part of the same groups or attended the same events. Some knew each other for many years while others had just met, as there were different levels of fluctuation in different groups. This was particularly evident in family constellations workshops, which are open to new participants and have only a few people who regularly attend, less so in shamanic groups, which are also open groups, but more people regularly come to seances. In contrast, in some groups (such as Sai Baba<sup>7</sup> and Mohanji<sup>8</sup>) there is little fluctuation, and members were generally closer to each other and knew each other for longer periods of time. However, due to the limited number of people involved in alternative spiritualities in Sarajevo, many knew each other, particularly those who had been interested in this topic for a longer period and had thus been meeting in various spiritual activities.

My criteria for selecting interlocutors were rather broad, as I focused on people who adhered to alternative spirituality, with 'alternative' referring to its distinction from established religions. Many of my interlocutors identified as 'spiritual but not religious' (for a discussion of the term see Fuller 2001; Wixwat & Saucier 2021), thereby rejecting the established religious institutions. However, there were two exceptions: interlocutors who were both spiritual and practicing Muslims. The rest of the participants were practicing different types of spiritualities. Some were members of informal spiritual groups (such as a shamanic circle, Brahma Kumaris<sup>9</sup>, and groups following gurus such as Sai Baba and Mohanji). However, most practiced spirituality independently. They attended different alternative spiritual workshops, read spiritual literature and watched videos about spirituality and were thus creating their own explanations, among others also about the appearance of the dead in dreams. In describing the spiritual movement of my interlocutors, I use the term 'alternative spirituality' and refer to its adherents – my interlocutors – as 'spiritual people.'<sup>10</sup> However, I am aware of the problematic nature of the term 'alternative spirituality,' as it is rather broad, and can include diverse, heterogeneous groups with a wide range of different worldviews and ideas (Sutcliffe & Bowman

2000: 10–11). To address this issue, I provide a description of each interlocutor and the groups and ideas that importantly influenced him/her.

Many of my interlocutors were critical of the term ‘alternative spiritualities’ for a different reason, claiming that they are not alternative, as they have existed for a long time in many contexts (such as Buddhism or Hinduism, but sometimes referring to the various ‘autochthonous’ beliefs and practices as well). I nevertheless use the term, especially to emphasize the alternative geographical origins of the spiritualities and to emphasize that I do not include spiritual people that belong solely to ‘traditional’ religious groups in Bosnia and Herzegovina (such as Muslim or Christian spirituality). However, some of my interlocutors also practice ‘traditional’ religion and combine that with alternative spiritual beliefs and practices (see Bužeková 2023: 13).

The majority of my interlocutors come from Muslim families, some from religiously mixed families (see Lendák-Kabók 2024), two from Catholic families, and two from Orthodox families. Many declined to adopt the ethno-religious identities commonly used in Bosnia and Herzegovina, instead identifying themselves as “Bosnians and Herzegovinians”. I assume that was so because this kind of resistance towards identification is rather widespread in Sarajevo (see Bartulović 2013). This is especially so with more politically liberal people and people who do not identify as part of any of the three main religions present in Bosnia and Herzegovina – Catholicism, Islam and Orthodox Christianity. Also, some of my interlocutors came from religiously mixed families and were critical of the distinctions between different religious groups that are widespread in the country’s political system and in everyday life.

Mostly, my interlocutors said that religion did not play a significant role in their upbringing; many of them stated that their family was socialist/communist. Except for the younger generation, they mostly grew up in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, which was a secular state. Following the establishment of socialist Yugoslavia after World War II, the new government, in line with Marxist ideology, tried to restrict the influence of the religions that were seen as hostile to it (Radić 2002a: 340–341). Religion became a private affair, and the government tried to prevent it from affecting social, economic and political contexts. Radmila Radić (2002b: 639–641) notes that while the state’s initial policies toward religion were similar to those of other Eastern European countries after World War II, Yugoslavia’s expulsion from Cominform in 1948<sup>11</sup> and subsequent collaboration with the West led to a more liberal approach toward religious communities. However, the ideological pressures towards religions were still exercised.

In the interviews, I asked participants general questions about their spiritual path, their attitudes towards the afterlife and their experiences with the dead.<sup>12</sup> In the analysis, I employed inductive qualitative content analysis based on my ethnographic data. In it, I focused on encounters with the dead in interlocutors’ dreams. To protect the identities of my interlocutors, I pseudonymized them

and, when necessary, modified personal information about them. Before each interview, I explained the purpose of my research, clarified that the material collected would be used for academic publications, and asked for their consent to record the interview. Due to the topic being potentially delicate, I was clear that participants did not need to answer any questions they may have found uncomfortable, and I was careful not to distress them during the interview.

Throughout my field research, when analyzing the data and in writing this article, I have taken my interlocutors' experiences of encounters with the dead seriously and have not questioned them (for a critical treatment of 'anthropological atheism' see Ewing 1994). I follow Amira Mittermaier, who discursively approached her interlocutors in a way so as not to set herself as an arbiter of their 'reality'. Instead, she explored dream experiences that were meaningful in the lives of her interlocutors, emphasizing the importance of acknowledging invisible actors and their impact on human experience (Mittermaier 2011: 28; see also Mittermaier 2012: 256). Nonetheless, this article has certain research limitations. Participants who agreed to be interviewed were perhaps more open to discussing spiritual matters and their experiences with the dead. It is possible that those who declined to participate had different, potentially more ambivalent or negative, experiences with the dead. Despite this, I hope that I have effectively conveyed and interpreted my interlocutors' accounts about their dreams of the dead.

## ALTERNATIVE SPIRITUALITY

The growing popularity of alternative spirituality, rising numbers of practitioners and the speed of its spread around the world have led some scholars to characterize it as a 'spiritual revolution' (see e.g. Tacey 2003). While Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead (2005: 2; 149) have questioned the term and speak instead of some 'mini revolutions,' it is clear that alternative spirituality is becoming influential globally. Heelas and Woodhead explain the growing popularity of alternative spirituality in the West as a consequence of the "subjective turn" as defined by Charles Taylor (1991). He theorized that it is a shift from a life lived in accordance with external, objective roles, obligations and responsibilities to a life lived in accordance with the individual's subjective experiences (Taylor in Heelas & Woodhead 2005: 2). Because spiritual groups emphasize individualized paths to personal growth and prioritize enhancing quality of life through subjective experiences, alternative spiritualities are more amenable to the Western societies after the subjective turn than mainstream religions (Heelas & Woodhead 2005: 5–29; 78; see also Heelas 2008: 5–40).

Nevertheless, reliable statistics on people involved in alternative spiritualities are often difficult to obtain (see Heelas & Woodhead 2005: 7), which was also the case in my research in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The discussion on the quantitative presence of alternative spiritualities is beyond the scope of

this paper, but in my field research I came across many spiritual groups that had been founded only in the last few years and encountered people who had recently become involved in alternative spiritualities (for the discussion on the rise of traditional religions and alternative spiritualities in other post-socialist countries see Črnič 2001; Potrata 2004; Radulović 2014; Kis-Halas 2019; Panchenko 2021; Tiukhtiaev 2021; Bužeková 2023). Some of my interlocutors in Sarajevo see alternative spirituality as a purer, non-corrupted expression of faith compared to mainstream religions, which they see as too closely connected with (corrupt) politics. Namely, after the war (1992–1995), Bosnia and Herzegovina experienced the rise of traditional religions, which became more publicly visible as the importance of ethnoreligious identities grew (see Kolind 2007: 124; Maček 2009: 162).

Although alternative spiritualities are of limited significance in Bosnia and Herzegovina, based on my fieldwork research I assume their relevance is slowly growing in urban contexts, gaining more public visibility and practitioners. As my interlocutors are spiritual but nevertheless grew up with different explanations of the possibility of contact with the dead, of the afterlife and the meaning of the dreams involving the dead, I will be interested in which interpretations they used in explaining their dreams of the dead. As ideas of the afterlife proved to be crucial for their understanding, I will first examine those.

## IDEAS ABOUT THE AFTERLIFE

Even though most of the interlocutors I discuss in this article were born into Muslim families and some into mixed or atheist families, they all stated they believe in reincarnation, and not in Islamic eschatology (for Islamic eschatology see Mabrouk 1987; El-Gazali 2000; Idleman Smith & Haddad Yazbeck 2002; Segal 2004: 642–693; Venhorst 2013). Islamic eschatology, as opposed to ideas about reincarnation, asserts that a person/soul only has one life that will determine his future in the afterlife (see Idleman Smith & Haddad Yazbeck 2002: 32–41). According to this religion, after death one's soul leaves the temporal world and waits in *barzakh* (intermediate phase) until resurrection.<sup>13</sup> The difficulty of that period and the final judgement at the time of resurrection is determined by the person's conduct during their life on earth (Venhorst 2013: 260–262). Reincarnation is therefore a foreign concept in Islamic eschatology, yet it is frequently mentioned by my interlocutors as their understanding of the afterlife. Often, they told me they found those explanations “logical” and “close to them”.

I met Ajša through the recommendation of a common acquaintance of ours. She was born in 1986 and comes from a religiously mixed family, all her grandparents being of different religions. However, her father was not practicing any religion, as he was communist, while her mother was more into spirituality, but not religious as well. She said that both were liberal towards different ideas.

Her seeking for metaphysical answers started in the adolescent period when she was researching different spiritual paths and traditional healing practices. In her early spiritual development, she mentioned reading the journal *Arka*, i.e., a local journal covering spiritual and paranormal topics, as well as other literature on related topics, and listening to Hare Krishna<sup>14</sup> lectures. There she was first acquainted with the idea of reincarnation. She stated that these ideas continue to resonate with her:

*To me personally, you know, it made sense from the beginning. For me – when I – of course, I didn't fully understand it when I was young, but that idea always made sense to me. Because in a universe where everything changes, it didn't make sense to me how something could just stop. [...] And so, for me, reincarnation was perfectly logical.*

Later she started practicing meditation, yoga and other spiritual techniques. Because she was interested in the topic of the afterlife, she attended a workshop where she got a clearer idea of it, as well as the idea of the possibility of communication with the dead. The workshop was related to the explanation of the Tibetan Book of the Dead. She told me that the soul goes to a certain space after death, where it processes the experience of this life before it plans for the new life and decides to be born again. In this space the living can access the soul with certain techniques. In a workshop she attended, a lecturer explained that contact with the dead is possible through dreams:

*She [the leader of the workshop] said that these souls [of the dead] often appear in dreams because that's the space where you can communicate. It could be an influence from the subconscious, or it could be an entry into that space, as they call it. Um, I don't know if you're familiar with the term the Akashic Field.<sup>15</sup> It's a field where – where you can connect, beyond time and space, with all the information that exists from the past, even the future. And that's this kind of field. Now, I'm not sure exactly, that field where the souls reside – I don't know – because they are connected [with the Akashic Field].*

Even though Ajša is mentioning the workshop on Tibetan Book of the Dead as her source of reference for the afterlife, it is evident that her interpretations involve other ideas as well. Alex Nash notes that the term “Akashic records” (or “Akashic field”) probably derived from the Sanskrit word *Ākāśa*, but that the concept as we understand it today is largely a product of the Theosophical society in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Its original understanding, which could be roughly translated as space, atmosphere or sky, was rather different as it did not involve its ‘archival function’, which is now regarded as its primary



characteristic (Nash 2020: 110–112). In theosopher Charles Webster Leadbeater's book we read that Akashic records are a higher medium located on the astral plane, which stores permanently impressed records of all past, present and future events (Leadbeater 1895: 19). Ajša, speaking of a place "where you can connect, beyond time and space, with all the information that exists from the past, even the future" is showing her understanding of Akashic fields as an 'archive' that Nash identified as a theosophic idea.

Another characteristic of her account that reflects the influence of New Age ideas on her belief in the afterlife is her view that souls process the experiences of a previous life before they plan for the new life and decide to be born again. Wouter J. Hanegraaff (2009: 267–268) explains that it is not reincarnation in itself, but a particular understanding of reincarnation that is typical of New Age beliefs. According to New Age reincarnationism, individuals reflect on the experiences between incarnations and decide on the challenges they still need to go through in order to continue evolving spiritually. Another specific feature of the New Age understanding of reincarnation, which is not evident from Ajša's accounts but is relevant to those of other interlocutors I will analyze below, is the idea of progressive spiritual evolution, which is understood as a process. Hanegraaff argues that the core of reincarnation beliefs in New Age is that reincarnations are seen as educational journey across the realities that enable continuous spiritual evolution (Hanegraaff 2009: 263–264; see also Bremmer 2002: 86).

It is mainly spiritual interpretations that can be identified as having an impact on Ajša's understanding of dreams of the dead, though she mentions psychoanalytical interpretations as well – the dreams can be "an influence from the subconscious." Although in her dream interpretation she refers to an authoritative figure – the leader of the workshop –, the ideas presented at the workshop were in line with her already held beliefs. As I already wrote, she had acquired those searching for her own explanations of the afterlife and other spiritual questions beforehand – in Hare Krishna lectures, literature she previously read, yoga and meditation courses she attended.

On the other hand, what is equally important is that her belief is based on her own experience of communication with her grandfather in dreams. Ajša claimed that she had a close connection with her grandfather through dreams and that she developed ways to intentionally connect with him. At first it was him getting in contact with her in dreams, while later she learned how to do lucid dreaming<sup>16</sup> with some techniques she learned at an abovementioned workshop on interpretations of the Tibetan Book of the Dead. She had contact with her grandfather for a few years, until it eventually ceased. She explains the cessation as the result of his reincarnation.

*My belief was that I met my grandfather while he was in that in-between space, because after some time – and it was really easy*

*for me, it was so easy to connect with him – but after a while, he disappeared. I never met him again, not once!*

While her view of the afterlife influenced how she experienced communication with the dead in dreams, her dreams of her grandfather confirmed her already held afterlife beliefs and further shaped them.<sup>17</sup> As she met him in an in-between space before incarnations, she interpreted that he showed her the space he was dwelling in and thus mapped it for her. She told me she imagines the afterlife as composed of various spheres where the souls go, depending on how they have lived. As he was a very thoughtful and caring person, she assumed he now resided in a higher realm, which he presented to her:

*I: And maybe, in a way, when I started exploring the Bardo<sup>18</sup>, it felt like he was showing me, mapping out that space a bit for me. That's how it seemed to me.*

*T: Who was mapping it for you?*

*I: My grandfather.*

*T: Ah, like he was showing you what's there?*

*I: Yes. Because that's this nonverbal space [...]. And in those realms, that type of communication remains. It's much more direct, more immediate [...].*

*T: And then he showed you those different spheres you mentioned, or just the sphere where he was?*

*I: I think just the one where he was.*

Various alternative spiritual theorists emphasize the importance of personal experience in alternative spirituality, as it is based on the personal experiences of its practitioners rather than on accepting dogmas (see Heelas 1996: 18–22; Sutcliffe & Bowman 2000: 8; Fuller 2001: 4; Houtman & Aupers 2010: 6; Wixwat & Saucier 2021: 122; Bužeková 2024: 1–3). In the case of Ajša, it was through her dreams she experienced the afterlife and got a confirmation and a concrete, clearer picture of her previously-held ideas of what happens after death. Personal experiences might be important in non-spiritual environments as well. Smiljana Đorđević Belić (2024: 9–17) argues that dreams of the dead of her Serbian interlocutors reflect the dispositions of the broader community while simultaneously reproducing the image of the afterlife. Thus, interpretations of dreams about the dead are shaped by pre-existing beliefs about the afterlife (see also Kiliánová 2010: 15) and, conversely, dreams of the dead can actively influence these beliefs<sup>19</sup> (see also Barrett 1992: 104; Stark et al. 1996: 260; Jung 2011: 301–311; Black et al. 2016: 111).

## DREAMS AS ONTOLOGICALLY REAL

Amira Mittermaier points out that states of dreaming and wakefulness have long been ontologically, epistemologically and ethically divided in the West (Mittermaier 2011: 10; cf. Bitel 1991). However, different authors note that dreams continue to be considered a form of contact with the supernatural and a reliable source of information in many vernacular religious traditions in the West as well (see, for instance Kiliánová 2010 for a village in Slovakia; Hesz 2012: 141–157 for Hungarians in Romania; Bitel 1991: 39–42 for Early Middle Ages Europe). The same holds true in other parts of the world. In her research on dreams among Egyptian Sufi Muslims, Mittermaier found that dreams have a high epistemological value for them: referring to dreams can have the same validity as referring to experiences from waking life (Mittermaier 2015: 135). Like the Sufi Muslims in Egypt, there are many cultures in which dreams are not understood as internal, psychological processes, but as providing access to other realities distinct from our reality of our everyday existence. Charles D. Laughlin and Adam J. Rock note that most cultures take dreams seriously – to confirm the individual’s role in society, travel in spiritual dimensions, enable contact with spirits, to get information and to solve problems (Laughlin & Rock 2014: 233–241; see also Kempf & Hermann 2003; Green 2015: 153).

Among my interlocutors, the experience of contact with the dead in dreams was often explained as ontologically real. Such an understanding is reflected in terminology. My interlocutors often used expressions such as that someone “came into a dream” [*dolazio u snove*] or that the souls of the dead are “getting in touch with us” [*stupaju u kontakt sa nama*]. Esma, a woman in her forties, grew up in a Muslim family, in which they followed many of the Islamic ways of taking care of the dead. Today it is ideas of reincarnation that she finds convincing and defines herself as spiritual rather than religious, though she still appreciates some Islamic teachings she finds pleasant and convincing. She tells me her thoughts of a soul travelling after death with which we can still have contact through dreams:

*Every time I wake up [from dreaming of the dead], I’m glad because I feel like I’ve met them in some other reality. Because, I mean, I truly believe that their souls – I mean, the body might decompose, but the soul goes on, I mean, the soul cannot be destroyed. Now we don’t know the journey of the soul, where it goes, but there must be some place where it goes. And so, I consider that to be some contact with those souls, when there are, let’s say, normal, pleasant dreams.*

Esma tells me she understands dreams with the dead that are “normal” and “pleasant” as dreams in which contact with the dead was real. She differentiates these types of dreams from those in which she feels no connection to the

deceased, interpreting the latter as dreams driven by the subconscious. Similar distinctions were commonly made by my interlocutors. Mostly, they described that they intuitively felt whether a dream was “just a dream,” arising from the psychological processes of the individual, as those dreams were either bad or did not provoke a feeling of closeness to the dead person. In contrast, when there was a feeling of presence and connection with the dead person, they interpreted those as genuine contact with the soul of the deceased.

My interlocutor Aldina, born in 1982, lost her boyfriend when she was in her thirties. She considers herself a spiritual person, who has been studying and practicing many different spiritual approaches in her spiritual path, from Buddhism to tantra yoga. After her boyfriend died of a ‘bad’ death,<sup>20</sup> she prayed for him in her daily rituals. It was only after several years that he began appearing to her in dreams, which she interpreted as a sign that he had been unable to reach out earlier due to a lack of energy resulting from his ‘bad’ death. He came to thank her in dreams, and although he looked tired, she understood that he most likely got reincarnated again and that her prayers helped him. As she had quite an elaborate perspective on the afterlife, she explained that contact with him as an astral encounter.

*I never even doubted it. I never doubt these things, I am absolutely certain that there is a connection, and that we meet, and that we hear each other – especially souls that are connected, or souls that travel together. But it was a very clear image – it was a very clear astral encounter [in a dream with her boyfriend] – it’s not like – I’m dreaming now, so was it him or wasn’t it. No, no, no, it was a clear astral encounter and, well, it’s very clear to me that we live very intense astral lives, I have no doubt.*

Like Aldina, Ajša used similar explanations for her encounters with the dead in dreams. Moreover, while Aldina told me she needs to be open to dream the dead but cannot initiate the encounters, Ajša developed techniques to contact the dead through lucid dreaming. In the following comment, she elaborates on her identification of “astral projection” with lucid dreams:

*It’s possible in dreams [to contact the dead], yes, because the whole dream space – what’s it called? [...] Astral projection. And that entry – what is the astral, really – thoughts and emotions. What are your personal thoughts and emotions, how does it work – so there are certain kinds of antennas within us, and we connect with specific thoughts and emotions, and the astral contains everything, right, in that way. And when you dream, in line with your tendencies, you enter a particular astral world. Essentially, it’s what you choose, right.*

*[...] And so, whether it's entering – entering a dream is essentially entering the astral space. And the difference between a lucid dream – astral projection – and an ordinary dream is the level of consciousness, how aware you are, because if you're just, in quotation marks, 'just dreaming', you're going along with whatever your tendencies are.*

For Ajša, all dreams happen on the astral level, but one can only control astral travel in lucid dreaming and thus avoid following the tendencies that otherwise guide one's dreams. When she had mastered lucid dreaming, she could intentionally visit the dead. Raymond L. M. Lee (2013: 113) argues that the New Age emphasis on self-potentiality allows individuals to develop different inner worlds. He notes that lucid dreaming is presented as an example of "worlds of the mind" that can serve as a bridge to the afterlife.

Similarly, Wouter J. Hanegraaff (1996: 259–260) notes that a central aspect of New Age belief is the existence of other realities that are freely accessible to individuals – often through altered states of consciousness. He highlights how New Age adherents perceive a connection between the world of the mind, and the realms where the soul resides after physical death. This reality is loosely described in theosophical terms as an 'astral plane'. In occultism it is defined as "the realm of concrete consciousness, the level of reality that corresponds to the human experiences of dream, vision, out-of-the-body experience, and ordinary consciousness" (Greer 2003). Astral travel, which can be achieved through various techniques (lucid dreaming among others), is the process in which the individual imaginatively separates the astral from the physical and etheric body (Greer 2003; Crow 2012: 159; see Leadbeater 1854).

In the examples of Aldina and Ajša, they both use the terminology of the "astral space", "astral travel" and "astral encounter". They understand their experience of contact with their deceased loved ones in these terms, and do not interpret it as an internal psychological process, but as a meaningful encounter, which was enabled through their access to the other realities. Both thus relied on spiritual interpretations, heavily influenced by theosophical understandings, and perceived their dreams of the dead as ontologically real.

## THE DEAD AS COMFORTING FIGURES

Most of my interlocutors described the presence of the dead in dreams as comforting.<sup>21</sup> Dreams where the dead appeared to guide and teach them or were preparing them for specific issues in life were especially common among people who were followers of particular gurus. Usually, they dreamt of the guru they were following – such as Sai Baba or Hare Krishna. However, in this article I will only discuss dreams of the personally significant dead.

I met Hana, born in 1983, as she contacted me herself, knowing what the interest of my research was and wanting to share her story with me. She too considers herself a spiritual person, practicing various spiritual disciplines for more than a decade, but she identifies as Muslim as well. She was brought up in a family where religion was not particularly emphasized, although her parents both came from Muslim families. In her teenage years she became interested in Islam, especially Sufism, and she considers Islam to be a spiritual religion and often intertwines it in her explanations about metaphysical topics. At the time we met, during Ramadan, she was fasting. However, she has also been attending family constellation workshops, energy healing, past life regressions and astrological counseling.

Hana told me about her grandmother visiting her in dreams. She told me she was thinking about the reason why her grandmother reached out specifically to her and attributed that to her being 'into spirituality'. She also explained that because of her spiritual understanding of the other world, she did not react to those dreams with fear, but with gratitude and honor:

*So, I – since I am into spirituality, I always receive that very – I receive it with gratitude, not with fear. I received it with gratitude and with great, honestly, with honor that she [her deceased grandmother] reached out to me specifically! Out of all of my relatives. Maybe she felt that I hear and see her, even in her afterlife, because I think that souls also choose those who have an open heart for the afterlife in their material body.*

Hana had dreams in which her grandmother appeared with a request to play some traditional Islamic songs – *ilahije* and *kaside*<sup>22</sup> – for her. She later went to her grandmother's grave and played some songs that her grandmother wanted to hear. For my interlocutor that was a very emotional moment, but she felt peaceful because of her feeling that this ritual brought peace to her grandmother's soul. She interprets this dream as a consequence of her work on herself through family constellations:

*Through family constellations, I have opened the field<sup>23</sup> many times – for my mother, my grandfather, and my mother's parents. But recently, I also opened it for my father's parents. They have both been in the other life for a long time as well. But I believe that this stirs up energy. [...] And through that healing process, I brought her [grandmother] some kind of comfort, if you understand me. And a sense of peace. So I think that's a big part of why she started appearing to me [in dreams].*



While my interlocutor interprets the appearance of her deceased grandmother in dreams as a result of stirred-up energy caused by her work with family constellations – a spiritual interpretation –, she is intertwining her explanations with Islamic interpretations of the dreams as well. In the next quote, she emphasizes the relationship with the dead within the Islamic calendar:

*But look this [dream] is all happening right before the holy month of Ramadan, which is interesting. Maybe in some way... In Islam, we also have the tradition of visiting the souls before Ramadan, cleaning their graves, tending to their eternal resting places, watering them [the graves], and washing them. It's almost like bathing their spiritual bodies – bathing their mezar, their grave. So I somehow took this as a kind of invitation before the holy month to come to her and reach out, you know what I mean? Since in this month, the heavenly gates are open, the angels (meleci) are present – everything is sacred in this month. And somehow, I felt it was also like: "Bathe me with song!" That's how I experienced it.*

Hana is using a spiritual, as well as an Islamic interpretation for her dream of the dead. She discursively places herself within the Islamic community, as she says that "in Islam we have a tradition of visiting the souls before Ramadan". She understands that period as a time "when the heavenly gates are open, and the angels are present" and reflects on the possibility that it was this openness that stimulated the contact with her grandmother.

In Islam, dreams are considered a means through which ordinary individuals can connect with sacred realms (Green 2015: 145–148; see also Mittermaier 2011: 7).<sup>24</sup> Besides that, dreams are the only way in which the dead can have a contact with the living (see also Segal 2004: 651; Sariyannis 2013: 211–213). Seen as real by Muslims, dream visions allow living people to visit the deceased, who can convey messages, request something, or offer reminders. These interactions can involve prophets, *evlijas*<sup>25</sup>, or familiar deceased individuals, such as ancestors and family members (El-Gazali 2000; El-Aswad 2002: 89–90, 43–44; Idleman Smith & Haddad Yazbeck 2002: 50–51; Campo 2004: 176; Mittermaier 2015: 134). An Imam<sup>26</sup> from Sarajevo told me that the dreams in Islam are mainly focused on the deceased:

*Now, if something happens – this kind of contact [with the dead] that comes through dreams – it is mostly interpreted as a way to show the status of the deceased in the afterlife. This is the most common interpretation. Although there are cases where some messages might be sent, they are generally not related to anything other than the deceased person. So, if someone dreams of a deceased person in*

*a beautiful state, it is interpreted that they are in a good place in the afterlife. If they appear in a distressing state, it is understood that their afterlife is not favorable. Based on this, actions may be taken, for example, to do something for the soul of the deceased, and so on.*

Hana interpreted her dreams as her grandmother communicating the wish she had in the afterlife. In contrast to my other interlocutors, who primarily relied on spiritual interpretations, Hana understood her dreams as an instance in which the dead came to her with a request. This was the only case during my fieldwork where a dream involved the dead requesting something from the living. That may reflect Hana being influenced by Islamic interpretations – along with spiritual perspectives – of dreams involving the deceased.

However, the difference in perception and ways of interpreting the dreams of the dead between spiritual and non-spiritual people is evident in the following comment. In it, Hana compared her interpretation of her deceased grandmother appearing in dreams with the interpretation of her mother, a non-practicing Muslim:

*So, my mom also dreamt [of her mother, interlocutor's grandmother] several times, and... to be honest, she was scared. Because she didn't understand what the soul wanted, why it was appearing in her life, what she could do... somehow, I've noticed that people who aren't into spirituality and into this concept of unity have much more fear than we do, we who understand that the soul hasn't come to harm or threaten [them] but has come out of pure love, out of a pure need for love. [...] She was somehow paralyzed by that fear that maybe the soul wanted something she couldn't give it. Or... I don't know, the whole contact between the dead and the living is deeply intertwined with emotions of fear and uncertainty. But for me personally, it's not so much that it feels close, as much as it just feels normal.*

While Hana dreamed of her grandmother asking her for a favor, she still emphasized *pure love* because of which her grandmother came into her dreams. She interpreted that her grandmother came specifically to her with her being into spirituality and into the “concept of unity”. Therefore, she saw the soul coming to her as “normal”. By contrast, for other people, the contacts with the dead are “intertwined with fear and uncertainty”. Kaarina Koski (2016: 16) emphasizes that spiritual people can appreciate the contact with the dead, which is evident from the normalization of the contact as described by Hana.

Apart from different understandings of dreams of the deceased grandmother they had, Hana and her mother also interpreted dreams using different interpretative frameworks. Her mother consulted an Islamic handbook for dream interpretation. There she found an explanation that such dreams could

mean that the dead came to take the living with them – thus foretelling the dreamer's death. By contrast, Hana follows her own intuition and feelings in dream interpretations:

*I, for example, don't interpret it that way. I interpret it based on my own feeling about the dream. [...] I don't think that I'm going to die because of it. I just think that she is close to me. So, in my opinion, interpreting those dreams isn't really relevant, because there can be a lot of fear involved if a deceased person appears to you in a dream. But to me, it's purely love.*

Among my interlocutors, it was common to interpret dreams by relying on intuition and feelings regarding dreams. This was also true for my interlocutor Mia, who practiced meditation to get the messages conveyed through her dreams. Mia, born in 1964, was born into a religious Muslim family. She sees Islam practiced by her family as spiritual and emphasizes her family's openness towards different views. In her adult years, she started to practice yoga and meditation herself, while also attending regular guided practices. She told me about her way of interpreting dreams through narration of concrete dreams of her dead brother:

*I dream of him [her dead brother] [...] He was much younger than he was when he left his body. [...] And so, I was thinking about what the message of that dream was. I never really figured it out, although I often received messages while meditating on dreams. I learned that in yoga – our instructor taught us how to meditate, how to receive a message, but also how to be at peace if we don't receive one. During some difficult periods in my life, I meditated and received messages through dreams, and they truly helped me a lot.*

Mia, like most of my interlocutors, did not use manuals or books to interpret dreams, nor consulted about them with some spiritual leader. Many interlocutors told me they rely on their intuition and feelings that dreams trigger in them, aligning them with ideas in alternative spirituality that emphasize personal paths to growth, self-improvement and the importance of subjective experiences (Heelas & Woodhead 2005: 29, 78; Heelas 2008: 5–40; Bužeková 2024). In alternative spirituality, the goals of finding one's authentic self and transcending one's socialized self are achievable through spiritual discipline, and throughout this process experience is given the highest authority (Heelas 1996: 18–22). While religion is more oriented toward institutions and organized systems of belief, spirituality emphasizes subjective, personal experiences (see Heelas 1996: 18–22; Sutcliffe & Bowman 2000: 8; Fuller 2001: 4; Houtman & Aupers 2010: 6; Wixwat & Saucier 2021: 122; Bužeková 2024: 1–3).

Corresponding to that, Paul Heelas defines an emphasis on the experience of the individual which provides “uncontaminated access to the spiritual realm” as a fundamental characteristic that unifies otherwise heterogeneous alternative spiritualities (Heelas 1996: 21). That can be seen in Hana’s ways of dream interpretation through the feelings she had in dreams and through Mia’s using meditation as a technique to get the meaning of the dream within herself.

As is also notable from Hana’s and Mia’s dreams, the dreams of the dead among spiritual people were prevalently described as positive, emphasizing the dead in them as comforting figures. Mirza, born in 1981, is a spiritual person from a Muslim family. He told me he has been “astral traveling” since he was a child. In his astral travels during dreams, he has met many deceased people who were close to him while they were alive. He described waking up happy after such dreams and explained how he understood those meetings:

*Well, my perspective [on dreams about the dead was] [...], like, a kind of farewell – to let them go, that they’re in a good place and moving on, and that we need to continue our lives. That came to me [...] intuitively, like some kind of answer. And that we’re always connected, that we love each other, you know, like that.*

A good place that Mirza mentioned as his idea on where his personally significant dead were, was in line with his idea of the afterlife. As with Mirza, my interlocutors considered the afterlife – or the place where souls are placed before being reincarnated again – as positive, describing it as a place full of love, connection, unity and purpose. In relation to their positive view of the afterlife, Hana and Mia described the *younger* appearance and *peaceful, blessed* energy of their dead significant others in dreams:<sup>27</sup>

*She [her deceased grandmother] wasn’t the same – maybe a little younger. Yes, she was younger, well-preserved, definitely not in old age. But she seemed... calm. Blessed, peaceful.*

*He [her deceased brother] was always younger in my dreams. [...] Because, like, when we leave this body, there we’re all in some kind of younger version of ourselves, in some kind of body of our own.*

Mia stated that she remembers dreams of her dead brother during difficult periods in her life. Because they had a good relationship while he was still alive, he continued to be a positive figure for her in the afterlife. She told me a dream in which he still had his former role of her brother:

*Then I remember, in one dream, he said to me like this, 'Don't worry about anything, about anything.' He said it several times, gesturing with his hand, looking at me, and I know that expression on his face, [...] And he looked at me so lovingly, with a sparkle in his eyes, 'But nothing.' Like he wanted me to promise him, 'But nothing, but nothing,' something like that. And I often think of it when things get really hard for me, you know, really.*

Emma was born in 1976 into a religiously mixed family. Her father's side was religiously diverse but not actively practicing any religion, while her mother's side were practicing Muslims. She emphasized that neither side imposed any beliefs on her. Before the war, she started practicing yoga and transcendental meditation, but during the war her engagement with spirituality deepened. Surrounded by death and dying, she also became more interested in questions about the afterlife. After the war, she emigrated and lived abroad for a decade, where she continued to explore different spiritual traditions.

Emma lost her boyfriend a few years ago. They were very close, and she described him as a very peaceful, fun and active person. He often appears in her dreams when she is having a challenging time. She particularly emphasized one dream, which she had not long after he died, while she was still in mourning:

*Once, I had a dream, and in my dream, he was sitting on a chair in the bedroom, like, on the side. And he says, 'Oh,' he says, 'my love,' he says to me, 'I know you're wondering where I am, but I'm here! I'm always here.' [...] So, it was a beautiful dream, like – like reassurance: 'Don't worry, I'm here, I'm here, I'm with you here.' [...] It was a very nice feeling, yes – of closeness and connection, I remember, it was a beautiful dream.*

Wouter J. Hanegraaff (1996: 264) argues that Western ideas of reincarnation are “this-worldly” as they assume that the dead continue to engage in the same activities and maintain the same relationships they had in life. This is different from Eastern reincarnation ideas, which presuppose that this-worldly activities will lose their meaning after death (see also Lee 2013: 120). In my research, dead people appearing to the living in dreams still had their former roles – of family members, friends or partners. Emma's boyfriend explicitly told her he is “still with her”, but manifestation of that message was implicit in most of the dreams I discussed in the article. Following Hanegraaff (1996: 264), that reflects a distinct Western reincarnation concept in which this-worldly – relationships, appearance, personality and wishes – will still be relevant for people after they die.

## CONCLUSION

In the article, I have demonstrated that many of my interlocutors – spiritual people in Sarajevo – experienced encounters with the dead through dreams as comforting. They mainly stated that they feel an ongoing connection with the deceased through such dreams; they feel that the dead still take care of them through subtle reminders, calm presence or reassuring messages. This is in a sharp contrast with traditional conceptions of the dead among Muslims in Bosnia and Herzegovina.<sup>28</sup> Traditionally it was widely believed that the dead were dangerous and better avoided and that bothering the dead – be they known or unknown people, who died either recently or long ago – would result in punishment (Softić 2016: 271–277). And while the appearance of the dead in dreams is not necessarily interpreted as negative in Islam, the focus tends to be on the deceased individual and their state in the afterlife. In contrast, among my interlocutors, it is a particular type of dream that prevails – those in which the dead appear to comfort and reassure the living.

Thus, when comparing the majority of my interlocutors' dreams of the dead with the Islamic understanding of such dreams, we see a reversal of the "historical pattern of obligation" (Kwilecki 2009: 123). Indeed, Susan Kwilecki (2009: 101–118) writes about contemporary experiences of after-death communication in the USA and points out that the dead have changed from traditional ghosts who want something from the living, are dangerous and vindictive, into spirits that have become therapeutic figures, available to the living. The message usually conveyed from the dead in after-death communication is that the dead are fine now, they are here for the living, they love them, and that they have come to apologize to or forgive the living. Those messages are rather similar to the messages my interlocutors received from their dead. Therefore, for spiritual people in Sarajevo, the dead are no longer dangerous, better to be avoided (Softić 2016: 271–277) or focused on themselves, but rather comforting, supportive and available to the living.

As a result, most of my interlocutors described feeling better in their waking lives after dreaming of the dead. They stated that the dreams actively helped them, especially during the bereavement period (see also Barrett 1992). In their dreams, the dead were mostly good-looking, and emotionally healthy – young, fresh, bathed in light and happy. They usually brought positive messages of love, connection, care and comfort. Dreams about the deceased were mostly a sign of continuing bonds for my interlocutors, a sign that the dead still taking care of them and supporting them (see also Black et al. 2016: 111; Niyazioglu 2016).

I argue that spiritual people's positive views of the afterlife shaped the way they experienced dreams of the dead. As is common in alternative spiritual understandings of the afterlife, my interlocutors emphasized continuous



growth after death rather than placement in a fixed realm, such as heaven or hell. Olav Hammer (2003: 469–469) notes that Western reincarnation beliefs are largely based on Theosophical interpretations. Among other historically influenced changes they integrated with the idea of reincarnation, the most important for the discussed topic is integration of the idea of evolutionism. Within this framework, reincarnation is portrayed as an optimistic process of the soul's continuous progress. Similarly, Wouter J. Hanegraaff (1996: 258) observes that in New Age religions, death is understood as an initiation, a necessary stage in development, transition to a new level of existence and part of the growth process, rather than the end (see also Lee 2013: 121; Lee 2015: 90–92), which reflects modern cultural values that prioritize personal development (Bremmer 2002: 102). Tony Walter (1993: 141) therefore highlights a prevailing optimism within New Age beliefs regarding both the afterlife and future incarnations.

Because of the positive view of the afterlife and ideas of growth in the afterlife, the personally significant dead my interlocutors dreamed about retained recognizable personal identities, kept their former roles, and appeared as comforting, emotionally available figures to the living. Conversely, disturbing or negative dreams about the dead were typically interpreted through psychoanalytic frameworks rather than as ontologically real encounters. It seems that such negative experiences conflicted with their broader understanding of the afterlife and were therefore not regarded as genuine contact with the souls of the dead.

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#### NOTES

- 1 In academia, dreams about the dead were mainly researched in the field of bereavement studies in psychology, where authors investigated the topics appearing in such dreams (Barrett 1992; Garfield 1996; Hinton et al. 2013; Black et al. 2016).
- 2 The ontological connection between sleep and death is present in many cultures (Mabrouk 1987: 11; Astuti 2007: 321; Rivière 2009: 109). Elisabeth Kirtsoglou (2010: 332) notes that *hypnos* (sleep) and *thanatos* (death) are twin sisters in Greek mythology. Similarly, sleep is considered a 'lesser death' in Islam (Mabrouk 1987: 11; see also Idleman Smith & Haddad Yazbeck 2002: 49).

- 3 Being a researcher from Slovenia played a role in shaping my access to interlocutors. Coming from a country that is geographically and culturally close to Bosnia and Herzegovina, I was perceived as somewhat familiar with local customs, habits and historical contexts, particularly due to the shared history of Slovenia and Bosnia and Herzegovina in Yugoslavia. However, I was still considered an outsider which may have made some participants more comfortable in sharing their experiences with me. Moreover, I was often treated as a guest and various people tried to help me with my research. I made it clear that I am not part of any spiritual movements myself, but I am interested in different ideas. Perhaps being a woman made it easier for me to access other women, which is reflected in the higher number of female participants.
- 4 As was the case in Sarajevo, other researchers noted that women are generally more engaged in alternative spiritual milieus (see Heelas & Woodhead 2005: 97–106; Bužeková 2014).
- 5 For etymological analysis and definition of the terms shaman/shamanism and neoshamanism see Bužeková 2014; Laughlin & Rock 2014: 234–235; Bužeková 2023: 14.
- 6 Family constellation therapy is a transgenerational, phenomenological, therapeutic intervention (Cohen 2006). It usually takes form in a group therapy. The method is often described as pseudo-scientific. I agree with Júlia Gyimesi who analyses it within the framework of Western esotericism (2023).
- 7 Sai Baba was an Indian guru. He passed away in 2011 but continues to have numerous devotees worldwide.
- 8 Mohanji is an Indian spiritual teacher who leads a transnational spiritual movement through his Mohanji Foundation.
- 9 Brahma Kumaris is a spiritual movement originating from India (see Brahma Kumaris n. d.).
- 10 My understanding of the term alternative spirituality aligns with Wouter J. Hanegraaff's (1996) definition of New Age religion.
- 11 The Cominform, or Communist Information Bureau, functioned as an agency of international communism. Rising tensions between the member states of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia culminated in the expulsion of Tito's party in 1948 (Britannica 1998b).
- 12 As I was asking interlocutors about their encounters with the dead they experienced in different settings, I assumed that encountering the dead in dreams would be the most frequent answer. That proved true, although there were many other ways the dead were experienced by my interlocutors – in rituals, through technology, natural events and feelings.
- 13 In the Bosnian language, the verb *preseliti* [to move, to relocate] is often used as a euphemism for 'to die'. Death is seen as a relocation from one world (i.e. the temporal world) to another, while the dead person is seen as a traveler (Softić 2016: 145).
- 14 The Hare Krishna movement is a popular name for The International Society for Krishna Consciousness. It directly derives from Vaishnavism, one of the three main religious streams of classical India. It centers on worshiping Krishna, who is a form of the god Vishnu worshiped in Vaishnavism (Črnič 2005: 675).
- 15 The Akashic records are defined as "in occultism, a compendium of pictorial records, or 'memories,' of all events, actions, thoughts, and feelings that have occurred since the beginning of time" (Britannica 1998a).
- 16 The American Psychological Association defines lucid dreaming as "a dream in which the sleeper is aware that they are dreaming and may be able to influence the progress of the dream narrative" (American Psychological Association 2023).
- 17 Interestingly, Carl Jung's idea was that dreams of the dead represented genuine communication with the deceased, while his personal experiences and the dreams of others played a significant role in shaping his ideas about the afterlife (2011: 301–315).
- 18 *Bardos* are intermediate/transitional states between birth, death and rebirth in Vajrayana (Tantric) Buddhism. The period between death and rebirth consists of three *bardos* (Stefon 2009).

- 19 In his autobiography, Carl Gustav Jung (2011: 301–315) describes his dreams involving the dead and states that he believes these dreams represent communication with the deceased. For him, both his own and others' dreams about the dead shaped his ideas of the afterlife.
- 20 'Bad' death in Slavic folk belief is defined by Lyudmila N. Vinogradova (1999) as "the category of harmful 'un-clean' deceased, [that] consists of: 1) those who died of 'not his own' death; 2) those who didn't break finally before his death relationship with the living [...]; 3) those who had been in contact with the evil spirits during their lives [...]."
- 21 Among dreams of the dead, I also encountered several cases of oneiromantic dreams and one interlocutor who told me that such dreams had negative impact on her, as she was still in bereavement and was sad those were just dreams.
- 22 *Ilahija* is a religious song, that can be performed either solo, by a choir, with or without instrumental music. While in the contemporary practice it is categorized under *ilahija*, *kasida* is a longer song dedicated to the Prophet Mohammed (Softić 2011: 164). During the 1992–1995 war, both forms acquired patriotic character (Hamer 2018: 117).
- 23 She is referring to the concept of 'the knowing field' as it is understood within family constellations. The concept is defined by Julia Gyimesi (2023) as encompassing "a sensory experience of the representatives that provides somatic and emotional access to the feelings, sensations, and repressed experiences of the person whom they are representing."
- 24 However, not all dreams are considered relevant in Islam. The scriptural tradition distinguishes between three types of dreams: those inspired by God, those inspired by the Devil, and those that are a reflection of the worries and wishes of the individual (for differentiations of dreams in Christianity see Bitel 1991). This differentiation corresponds to the opinion about dreams shared by the majority of Muslims today (Edgar & Henig 2010: 251–253; cf. Mittermaier 2011: 6).
- 25 *Evlija* is very loosely defined as a Muslim "saint" (cf. Bejtić 1982; Mencej 2021: 11).
- 26 Imam is "in a general sense, one who leads Muslim worshippers in prayer. In a global sense, imam is used to refer to the head of the Muslim community (*ummah*)" (Britannica 2025).
- 27 I only heard a few instances of people who looked tired or old – in one example because of a 'bad death' and in the other because – according to the interlocutor – the soul was temporarily frightened and lost after death, and her situation and appearance got better with time.
- 28 For Bosniak ghost narratives in the Srebrenica region, which have the effect of preserving the memory of the massacre, reclaiming space and punishing the Serbs for the crimes they committed during the war see Mencej 2021. For the agency of the dead who punish mistakes and frighten the living among the Bosniak population in central rural Bosnia and Herzegovina see Mencej 2025.

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# Living Connections: Continuing Bonds Between the Living and the Deceased in Rural Northeastern Slovenia

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**Abstract:** The article explores the role of plants in mediating ongoing bonds between the living and the deceased. Drawing on ten months of ethnographic fieldwork in a rural region of northeastern Slovenia, this study focuses on three personal narratives where individuals maintain connections with deceased loved ones through plants. These natural objects – daffodils, a blooming cactus and magnolia trees – serve as material manifestations of the deceased, offering comfort, continuity and a sense of presence. Using the continuing bonds grief model (Klass & Silverman & Nickman 1996) as a theoretical foundation, the article examines how these bonds transcend traditional bereavement practices, creating everyday spaces for relational continuity. The article argues that plants act as living bridges between the living and the dead, transforming the understanding of grief into a relational process that fosters enduring connections within broader cultural and natural frameworks.

**Keywords:** flowers, plants, trees, continuing bonds, bereavement practices, the dead, anthropology of death, rural Slovenia

## INTRODUCTION

Flowers have long been central to how we mark and make sense of death. They not only reflect the natural cycle of life but also serve as powerful metaphors for transitions, renewal, and memory, from their role as final gifts to the deceased to their symbolic meanings within funeral rites, where color and type hold deep significance. Yet, beyond their role in rituals, flowers take on deeply personal meanings for the bereaved. In my fieldwork, flowers emerge not just as symbols but as living connections between the living and the dead. This article explores how blooming plants, present in the everyday lives of individuals, may hold the presence of the deceased and offer comfort, resilience and a sense of enduring relationality between the living and the dead.

The dominant Western ideology sees the dead as absent from people's daily lives with contemporary lifestyles often portraying the individuals as self-sufficient and independent of others, both the living and the dead (Walter 2018). Although the dead are considered absent from public discourse, several researchers challenged this view, demonstrating that they may remain present and have significant influence on people's daily lives (e.g. Walter 2020; Walter 2016; Hallam & Hockey 2001). The dead can impact daily life and social norms, as reflected in their continued agency (Walter 2018), and may act as carriers of social memory. This is particularly evident in politically or socially sensitive deaths, such as violent ones, where the dead highlight injustices and reshape collective memory (Mencej 2021). Richardson (2003) shows how stories of haunted dead reveal unresolved social conflicts and help shape communities. In some contexts, the dead are also seen as active figures, 'moral agents' who can actively influence the lives of the living, especially when certain moral norms are violated (Mencej 2024). Hallam and Hockey (2001) examine how material culture – from everyday objects to funerary monuments – helps maintain connections between the living and the dead in Western societies.

The article is based on ethnographic field research conducted from January to November 2024 in the rural northeastern region of Slovenia, which borders Austria, Hungary and Croatia. This area is characterized by a picturesque landscape of flat plains, rolling hills and scattered villages. The region is known for its agricultural traditions, but many residents nowadays commute to work in nearby towns or across the border in Austria. The population is predominantly elderly, as younger people tend to move to urban areas in search of better job opportunities. This part of Slovenia is also characterized by a mixture of Roman Catholic and Protestant communities, and some smaller neo-Protestant communities such as the Calvinists and the Pentecostal Church.

In my research I used a classical ethnographic approach, combining participant observation and semi-structured interviews to explore how individuals experience, interpret and engage with the presence of the dead in their everyday lives. During my fieldwork, I visited 24 small villages in the area and

conducted interviews with 154 interlocutors of different ages and genders. However, due to the demographic composition of the region, I spoke mainly with older interlocutors, with a predominance of female participants. During the fieldwork I audio-taped numerous personal narratives and was particularly drawn to stories of enduring bonds with the deceased expressed through natural objects such as plants. These connections go beyond memory, as the presence of and interaction with the dead continue to be felt and experienced through the growth and blooming of plants, which are closely interwoven with daily life. Drawing on the theoretical framework of the *continuing bonds* grief model (Klass & Silverman & Nickman 1996), the research explores the bonds between the living and the dead that go beyond traditional bereavement practices and create an everyday space for maintaining contact with the (known) deceased.

## CONTINUING BONDS

In contemporary Western ontology, the dominant idea is that the dead are primarily passive and that their presence in the lives of the living is limited to memory. Freud's theory posited that healthy grief required the bereaved to detach from the deceased within a limited time frame, as the maintenance of bonds with them was considered pathological (Klass & Silverman & Nickman 1996: 33–35). At the end of the last century, however, Klass, Silverman, and Nickman introduced an alternative perspective in the book *Continuing Bonds: New Understandings of Grief* (1996), challenging the then-prevailing notion that bereaved must “break the bonds of past relationships” in order to move forward and establish new connections. In this volume, authors emphasized that a significant aspect of navigating loss lies in maintaining a connection between the bereaved and the deceased (Klass & Silverman & Nickman 1996: 3). They proposed a shift in the understanding of grief, suggesting that continuing bonds with the deceased should be recognized as one possible way of adapting to life after loss (Silverman & Nickman 1996: 351). Unlike Freud's model, the continuing bonds framework acknowledges relationships that go beyond mere remembrance, involving continued interactions with the deceased through symbolic, sensory and even material connections.

The continuing bonds grief model represents a natural and potentially adaptive part of the grieving process, allowing people to maintain meaningful connections that provide comfort, preserve memories and support psychological resilience in the midst of loss. However, not all bereaved individuals experience a sense of presence or a continuation of bonds with the deceased. Likewise, not all continuing interactions with the dead lead to better adjustment (see Klass 2006: 844); as Klass, Silverman and Nickman (1996: 72) noted, “we need to be open to both the positive and negative consequences of this activity”. Moreover, grief cannot be understood as having a clear endpoint, nor can

it be framed in terms of recovery or resolution, as these terms imply a final stage. The process of adaptation does not sever or disregard past relationships; instead, it integrates them into a broader framework of meaningful exchanges (Klass & Silverman & Nickman 1996: 19).

### **Forms of Continuing Bonds**

The continuing bonds model represents a significant shift in bereavement studies, challenging earlier psychological theories that framed grief as a process of detachment from the deceased. Within this framework, bonding was understood as a dynamic social act sustained through various interactions, forms of communication and the active preservation of the deceased's legacy (Walter 1996: 69–82; Day 2012; Koski 2016).

These bonds manifest in various forms, including the perception of the deceased's presence, the internalization of their characteristics, or the belief that the deceased actively influences the bereaved's thoughts or events in their life. Additionally, these connections may appear as dream visitations (e.g., see Heszi 2012; Kiliánová 2010: 13–14), precognitive visions (see Rees 1972), or telepathic experiences with the deceased. Symbolic messages, significant spontaneous thoughts and synchronicities – such as coincidental events or the appearance of objects associated with the deceased – are also frequently reported (see Parker 2005: 257–258). In addition, some report unusual activity in electrical appliances or meaningfully timed appearances of animals, rainbows and other symbolic natural phenomena as signs of ongoing bonds (Kwilecki 2011: 220).

The internalization of the deceased is not necessarily tied to religious beliefs or an expectation of an afterlife but rather reflects an individual's psychological adaptation to loss. Through internalized relationships, the bereaved integrate the memory, values and influence of the deceased into their own identities and everyday lives (Klass & Silverman & Nickman 1996). Parker (2005: 262) notes that while belief in an afterlife may help mitigate the disruption caused by death, even those who do not hold such beliefs can experience a profound sense of continuity through internalized memories and emotions. The bereaved may continue conversations with the deceased in their thoughts, seek guidance from them or make life decisions based on their perceived influence. As Kwilecki (2011) notes, these experiences are often framed as comforting encounters in which the deceased convey messages of love, reassurance and ongoing presence in the mourner's life. Such interactions offer a way for individuals to maintain a meaningful relationship with the dead, even as they move forward in their own lives.

Sensory experiences related to the deceased are another common form of continuing bonds, encompassing visual phenomena (e.g. apparitions), auditory perceptions (e.g. hearing the deceased's voice), olfactory sensations (e.g. specific scents linked to the deceased) and the mental reception of messages



from the dead (see Klass & Steffen 2018, Parker 2005: 257–258; Bennett 1999: 109; Davies 1997: 156). Within the context of bereavement and grief, Parker (2005: 257) defines “extraordinary” experiences as experiences occurring at the time of or after the death of someone known to the experiencer and perceived as contact or communication with the deceased. These experiences are far from abstract, distant or immaterial. Instead, the presence of loved ones is felt in tangible, embodied ways. Extraordinary experiences can be a form of continuing bonds, as they allow contact with the deceased to be expressed through unusual or symbolic events that the individual understands as a sign from or communication with the dead. Extraordinary experiences, being rare and deeply meaningful events perceived as being outside the boundaries of everyday life, provide a direct and embodied way for the bereaved to maintain symbolic connections with the deceased.

The material world also plays an important role in maintaining continuing bonds with the deceased. Hallam and Hockey (2001) explore how material objects maintain these relationships, arguing that personal belongings – including garments, letters and photographs – preserve the presence of the dead and act as a safeguard against forgetting (Hallam & Hockey 2001). Gifting objects to the dead – for example placing flowers on graves, lighting candles or leaving personal items – demonstrates how material culture facilitates ongoing relationships (Jonsson & Walter 2017: 407). These acts are not simply gestures of remembrance but performative ways of maintaining a bond, reflecting both cultural traditions and personal expressions of grief. Physical spaces of memorialization, such as cemeteries, tombstones, home altars or dedicated rooms, provide a setting for ritual interaction and reinforcing the sense that the deceased remain part of everyday life (see Maddrell 2013; Jonsson & Walter 2017). The presence is further maintained through rituals, visits to significant places and material objects – graves, personal mementos and symbolic offerings like flowers or plants – which serve as tangible connections between the living and the dead (see e.g. Clayden & Dixon 2007). Maddrell (2016), who has conducted research on how continuing bonds are maintained in more overt “deathscapes”, identified three overlapping spatial arenas in which the deceased may be placed – physical or material (comprising obvious deathscapes such as cemeteries and shrines), embodied-psychological (which are more subjective and personal) and nonmaterial spaces (such as support groups, social media, or heaven).

Continuing bonds with the deceased are therefore not merely mental or emotional constructs, but rather a multidimensional process that encompasses the reorganization of relationships after death, the role of the deceased within family and community systems and their influence on the living (Klass & Steffen 2018: 4). As Klass and Steffen argue, the bonds formed during life persist in the posthumous relationship, but they can also change, offering the bereaved an opportunity to develop a connection that may not have been possible while

the person was alive. While personal experiences of the dead are unique, they are also shaped by broader cultural narratives and norms. Grief is an intersubjective process that is not only an individual experience but also takes place in a relational and communal context. The model shows that these relationships are embedded in social and cultural systems and are not isolated psychological phenomena (Klass & Steffen 2018), and that continued bonds therefore reflect shared meanings and collective practices rather than purely individual bonds.

While Klass and Steffen cite many studies and examples of forms of continuing bonds, they do not specifically address the bond with the deceased through plants. The phenomenon, which I encountered during my ethnographic fieldwork, adds another dimension to the concept of continuing bonds. Based on my field research in the rural northeastern region of Slovenia, I will argue that plants act as material and sensorial bridges between the living and the dead, enabling the bereaved to maintain connections with the deceased beyond traditional bereavement practices. I will suggest that plants and flowers represent one form of continuing bonds, acting as living elements that provide relational continuity and comfort to the bereaved.

## CONTINUING BONDS AND PLANTS

In the following, I will explore a specific form of continuing bonds observed in my fieldwork: plants and their natural cycles serve as material connections between the living and the dead, offering comfort, continuity and a sense of the dead's presence. My ethnographic research suggests that the dead manifest themselves through continued interaction with natural objects, such as plants, perceived by my interlocutors as both symbolic and living manifestations of the ongoing bonds with the deceased. They not only allowed the bereaved to remember their dead loved ones but also to sense their continued presence in daily life.

My aim is not to examine institutionalized bereavement practices. Instead, I take an ethnographic approach, drawing on narratives collected from small villages and focusing on various ways in which the living experience and interact with the dead. I will first present three personal narratives that illustrate different ways in which plants maintain bonds between the living and the dead. Then, I will place these examples within the broader framework of local cultural practices and beliefs. Finally, I will discuss how these everyday interactions with the natural world reflect a continuous presence of the dead in people's lives and contribute to the broader discussion of continuing bonds.

## Daffodils in Bloom



**Figure 1.** Blooming daffodils.

Photographed on March 3, 2024, by Simona K. Zupanc.

The first narrative was told by Geza<sup>1</sup>, born in the 1940s. He is a retired school-teacher. Although he grew up in a Catholic environment, he now identifies as an atheist.

At the beginning of March, winter is slowly giving way to spring in a region known for its lush sunshine. The first flowers in the meadows and gardens signal the awakening of nature. It was on one of those crisp, bright days, with a hint of warmth in the air, that I rode my bike to Geza's house. Geza welcomed me warmly and began to show me around the house, which he, like many others in the area, had built himself in the 1980s. During the walk, our conversation naturally turned to his early childhood and his relationship with his parents. He explained that he had a close bond with his mother, but his relationship with his father was much more distant, mainly due to his father's seasonal work in Austria and the resulting absences. This long absence, coupled with his father's alcohol problems, led to a strained relationship within the family. His parents later separated, and his father remarried, further disrupting their

bonds. However, his father's absence only strengthened Geza's connection with his mother.

*You know, it was like this; I liked my mother much more, while my father was mostly at work. [...] I had an excellent relationship with my mother, but with my father so-so – in particular, I had to take care of him so to keep him out of trouble. He didn't even earn a pension because he was a seasonal worker. In the summer he worked, and in the winter, he drank at home. (February 28, 2024)*

Geza recalls that his family, like many others in the region, lived in poverty at the time. While his father wanted him to follow in his footsteps as a bricklayer, his mother strongly encouraged him to get an education, as a means to secure him a better future. Her words “go and study” stayed with him and influenced his decisions throughout his life. Geza's mother worked on the family farm and spent most of her time at home, strengthening her attachment to the home-stead. Shortly after her death the family house was destroyed by fire, causing Geza to lose all the objects that reminded him of her.

*I have no memories left. That's what hurt me the most. Nothing, nothing at all. Everything is gone, yes. Everything. All the memories. (February 28, 2024)*

When she died, Geza was 18 and still in high school. Motivated by her encouragement, he chose to continue his studies and eventually earned a college degree. After graduation, he returned to his hometown to work and build a new house on the site where he had once lived with his mother. He reflects on how the area where the house now stands was once covered in mud and his mother often wished the house had been built on higher ground. As he looked back on his achievements, he recalled his aunt telling him that his mother would have been proud of what he had accomplished. Despite losing his memories in the fire, one in particular remains vivid – Geza continues:

*There was a swamp and at school we learned about daffodils. I found one, dug it up and brought it home to my mother. She said, “Plant it here in the garden.” Now it has 70 flowers, that's how much it has multiplied. [...] This is the only living memory I have of my mother. [...] I loved to pick flowers and bring them to her. And whenever I go to the cemetery, I think of these things. (February 28, 2024)*

For Geza, daffodils are more than just flowers – they serve as a material anchor that allows him to feel his mother's presence, strengthen their bond and maintain a sense of continuity, enabling him to actively engage with her

memory. This interaction with the daffodils aligns with the continuing bonds model, which emphasizes the importance of maintaining a connection with the deceased through objects, rituals, or memories. In this case, the plant serves as a tangible manifestation of Geza's enduring emotional bond with his mother. Rather than seeing her death as the end of their relationship, he uses the daffodils to perpetuate her presence in his life.

### Blooming Christmas Cactus

The second narrative was told by Erika, born in the 1950s. She is a retired kindergarten teacher who identifies as Catholic and practices her faith, especially during important Christian holidays. I met Erika for the first time in the local cultural center at the opening of an exhibition on agricultural work in paintings. After that, I visited her several times for coffee, where she told me stories about her family and life in the village. In these conversations, she often reminisced about her childhood, and her mother in particular:

*Back then, it was just normal – I would come home from school, and I had to lift every pot lid, even if I had already eaten lunch, just to try something. And now, even though she's [her mother] been gone for six years, I think of her every year. She used to make strudels, cabbage ones, and ones with yellow turnip. And now I've been making them ever since she's gone. Somehow, I feel like it's a way of remembering her. Those little habits of hers that we loved but didn't practice before.*  
(March 7, 2024)

One of our conversations took place just a few weeks before Easter, during Lent – a time traditionally dedicated to reflection, fasting and spiritual preparation, which that year began on Ash Wednesday, February 14. During our conversations, she frequently spoke about her close relationship with her father, who passed away when she was 18 years old. She recalled how he used to weave baskets and mentioned that she still keeps one he made for potatoes. She cherishes it as a precious reminder and a way to feel connected to him by preserving and continuing the habits he once had. This loss profoundly affected her and led to an even stronger bond with her mother, who passed away six years ago. After her mother's death, she began to sense her presence in a cactus that her mother had given her. She shared how her mother's soul manifests in the cactus's unexpected blooming, offering her comfort and reassurance that her mother was still there, watching over her.

*I often think about my mother... and she's within me, isn't she? How would my mother do this, how would she help me, how should I decide? And it's very interesting, that cactus I have there. Yes, it bloomed a lot for my mother, and then she gave me a small one. It*



*didn't bloom for five years, but after my mother died, it bloomed for the first time at Christmas. And that meant a lot to me. I think there's a kind of energy that stays behind; maybe the soul travels away, not exactly in a religious sense, and that meant so much to me. It was as if she had given me a sign that she was still somehow present, and it bloomed again at Christmas. And recently, I've seen it bloom again, just in time for Easter, because it always bloomed for her at Easter. And that's... and then you start thinking, there really is something to it. [...] If I were to explain that to someone, they might say I'm a bit crazy [...]* (March 7, 2024)

Although Erika considers the experience extraordinary, she is assured that her mother is still present and communicates with her by causing the cactus to flourish. She was especially surprised when the cactus bloomed for the first time since her mother's passing.

*[...] I kept moving it around, but it just would not bloom. And really, the year after she died, it bloomed for the first time. And that somehow moved me. Especially now that she's gone [...] Now it blooms for the first time at Easter. It used to only bloom at Christmas. And I, for one, have no explanation for that. But like you asked, I feel like she is watching over me and giving me signs that we're still connected somehow.* (March 7, 2024)

Erika is a Christian, and the Christian faith does not support the belief in communication with the dead. However, in this case, she is unconcerned with the church's stance. These beliefs are not religious, nor do they reflect abstract ideas about heaven, hell or the nature of spirit, soul or matter, as Abby Day argues (2012). She demonstrates that experiences of continuing bonds with the deceased are primarily *relational* rather than rooted in traditional religious or spiritual frameworks. Instead of being framed as encounters with spirits or supernatural phenomena, they emerge through ongoing social connections with significant deceased individuals. Day's research highlights how people engage with the presence of the dead in ways that reflect personal relationships, memories and emotions, rather than conforming to religious dogma or institutionalized beliefs, which reflects a broader shift in which religion has become decentralized, allowing individuals to construct their own beliefs without answering to institutionalized religion or science unless they choose to do so. As Kwilecki (2009: 106) demonstrates in the American context, the tension between religion and science that once shaped spiritualist movements has eased over time, giving rise to a more individualized approach to faith. The increasing diversification of religious and spiritual beliefs has facilitated the persistence of emotional bonds with the dead outside the confines of traditional



religious frameworks. The view aligns with Erika's experience of feeling her mother's presence through the blooming cactus, demonstrating a personal and relational connection that transcends conventional religious doctrines.

The cactus bloomed again at Easter, further reinforcing Erika's belief that her mother's *energy* was truly still present. It bloomed on an important holiday for Erika, which she usually celebrates with her family. The holiday holds dual significance: on the one hand, according to Christian dogma, it represents the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, symbolizes hope, victory over death and life after death; on the other hand, it marks the beginning of spring, the awakening of nature and the symbolism of rebirth. Easter is therefore connected to both religious traditions and seasonal cycles, where spiritual and natural renewal intertwine. Erika's interpretation of the blooming cactus as a sign of her mother's presence indeed aligns with a broader vernacular discourse in the Western world that ascribes agency to the dead. As Walter (2016) notes, the deceased are often imagined not as passive souls trapped in heaven, but as active agents – akin to angels – who move between worlds to guide and care for the living. Similarly, Erika perceives the blossoming of the cactus, which she believes was triggered by her mother, as a conscious act of her mother's presence and care, particularly on important Christian holidays. For Erika, the moment holds deep significance, as it reinforces her ongoing bond with her mother and highlights her mother's agency in shaping meaningful moments in her life.

Walter's insights offer a theoretical framework for understanding such phenomena, emphasizing that the agency of the dead is not only culturally recognized but also personally experienced. In Erika's case, the blooming cactus serves both as a tangible manifestation of her mother's presence and care and a spiritual connection that transcends conventional religious dogma. As scholars of continuing bonds have demonstrated, the bereaved often find ways to maintain the relationship with the deceased through everyday actions or objects with symbolic meaning. Continuing bonds in the form of actions can be integrated into everyday life, such as tending flowers – practices that are performed without fixed places, times or special occasions (Lau & Fong & Chan 2018: 281–282). The constant care becomes a subtle, continuous expression of connectedness that blends seamlessly into the rhythm of daily life.

Through Erika's relationship with the cactus and seasonal blooms, we see how memory, spirituality and material objects can be woven together to create a reassuring sense of continuity. Erika associates the blooming of the cactus with pleasant feelings and senses the presence of her mother. This is especially important to her on traditional Christian holidays, which she usually celebrates with her family members. Similarly, Kwilecki (2009: 115) notes that the dead, according to after-death-communication testimonies, often manifest during holidays and special occasions, when their absence might be particularly stressful for the living. In Erika's case, the timing of the cactus'

blossoming on these occasions suggests that her mother is reintegrated into the family, once again becoming part of the gathered household. Rather than being a mere coincidence, the flowering of the cactus becomes a meaningful event that underscores Erika's enduring connection with her mother, particularly on days meant for family togetherness.

### Magnolia Tree



**Figure 2.** Magnolia tree in bloom.

**Photographed** on March 26, 2024, by Simona K. Zupanc.

The third personal narrative was told by Tomaž, born in the 1970s. He is a farmer with a college degree and grew up in a Catholic setting but no longer feels tied to dominant religious practices. I got to know Tomaž right at the beginning of my field research. In the course of my research, I visited his family several times and talked to them about village life, their work and family history. He lives with his family on a small plot of land that he and his late wife bought as an abandoned property and slowly renovated themselves. He tries to grow as much of their own food as possible, but on the other hand, he is also careful not

to harm nature by farming. He follows the principles of permaculture, a system of planning that allows people to meet their needs without harming the environment but rather benefiting it and thus allowing it to live “forever”. For Tomaž, however, permaculture is not just a farming method but a way of life – a philosophy of living in harmony with nature and oneself.

After the death of his first wife, Tomaž remarried, and together with his second wife, they continue their work on the property. Tomaž and his wife often involved me in larger tasks on the property, such as mowing and hay harvesting. They also generously lent me several interesting books by local authors and gave me insightful recommendations, reflecting their shared passion for literature. Both also have a keen interest in traditional folk medicine and eagerly share their extensive knowledge on the subject during our meetings.

He shared that after his former wife was diagnosed with a debilitating condition, she changed dramatically. Eventually, she separated from him and moved in with her parents, where she passed away a few months later. In the last months of her life, they had no contact due to their divorce, which affected him greatly. Her family blamed him for her illness, and due to the family disputes, he decided not to attend her funeral. Tomaž explained that the grave her parents had placed in the cemetery in their hometown held no personal meaning for him. However, he understood her decision, given her illness. Despite the estrangement, Tomaž described how they continued their relationship after her death, as if the conflict and divorce had never happened.

*She [his late wife] is the person with whom I still have the closest connection. As for the influence on my decisions... well, she's often on my mind. I don't necessarily consult her when I'm thinking about something, but I think of her often, especially in good or challenging times. It's a kind of gratitude, I think. We bought and built this house together, so it's like she's still a part of it. [...] Eight. Eight years [since she died]. Her spirit, or what we shared, is still present. How much that influences my current decisions, I can't say. I don't rely on it and I don't try to. (March 13, 2024)*

This is similar to Klass and Steffen's description of how the entire history of the bond between people when they were living carries over into the bond after their death, although the living have opportunities to reshape the bond that they did not have when the person was alive (2018: 4). In Tomaž's case, his wife's death offered him the opportunity to overcome the unresolved conflicts that had characterized their last years together. Tomaž, like the other two interlocutors, speaks of his wife's presence in a plant. The presence is particularly strong during the time of its blooming.

*After she died, my son and I planted some magnolia trees that always remind me of her. They remind me of her every day when I walk around here. It's like we planted them instead of having a tombstone or something like that. They are the place where I think of her most often. The magnolia blooms in early April, on her birthday, but I see that it may bloom earlier this year. So, in that way... well... (hesitantly). The years after her death were very hard, and during that time my relationship with her felt even more intense. But life went on. I have a new wife and another daughter, so her presence is not as intense now. (March 13, 2024)*

The magnolia tree that Tomaž planted in his herb garden serves as an alternative to a traditional tombstone. The tree, which surrounds him every day as he moves around the garden, preserves the presence of his wife, his memory and interactions with her. Although Tomaž no longer practices Catholic religion, the natural cycle of life now forms the foundation of his worldview.

*The concept that comes closest to me is the eternal cycle in nature, where everything transforms from one living form to another and then into forms that we call dead, but from another perspective are probably alive. This eternal cycle is a comfort to me, especially because I am so involved in agriculture. It comforts me to see that even if you uproot a plant, it turns into compost and then something new grows. Everything is connected. I try to make my environment as alive as possible because I believe it supports us better and we can integrate into the cycle more easily than in a desolate or dead environment. Religion, well, that's kind of a worldview [...] (March 13, 2024)*

In speaking about the eternal cycle in nature, Tomaž expresses the concept of life after death through the transformation of life forms, death being part of a continuous, interconnected cycle of life. This view is similar to Day's (2012) assertion that people who believe in an afterlife essentially maintain a belief in the continuation of important relationships. For Tomaž, the cycle of life and death through nature represents a comforting relational continuity with the deceased, reflecting a deep connection with both life and the world around him. Through Tomaž's relationship with the magnolias and his embrace of the natural cycle, we see how bereavement and memory are transformed in a way that intertwines human life with the ecological world, creating a cyclical, living bond that endures beyond death.

Indeed, Tomaž expressed his wish for a similar way of life after death, i.e. a continuation in another natural life form. This might refer to symbolic immortality, a secular model for understanding life after death introduced by



Robert J. Lifton in the 1970s. He developed this concept to address the psychobiological need of humans to symbolize death and affirm the continuity of life. Lifton calls this the “sense of symbolic immortality” and argues that life is fundamentally threatened if death cannot be transcended (Lifton 1983 [1979]: 19–23). This transcendence is achieved through contributions to the world and a sense of connectedness to enduring phenomena and values that give life meaning and continuity. One of five manifestations of symbolic immortality, proposed by Lifton, is “natural immortality”, which emphasizes a deep connection to the natural world and views death as a return to earth (Lifton 1983 [1979]: 22–23). Tomaž’s desire to continue life in a natural form reflects this perspective, as he sees death not as an end, but as a transformation – a reintegration into the cycles of nature.

In Western cultures, the practice of planting a tree instead of erecting a tombstone, known as ‘eco-tombstones’, has recently gained popularity as an environmentally friendly alternative to traditional stone memorials. Replacing marble memorials with natural imagery, such as trees or other plants, not only offers alternatives to conventional burials but also incorporates the comforting and calming effects of nature. These practices are increasingly tied to ecological concerns, environmental care and commitment to the planet’s well-being. Although modern, these practices can be historically traced back to the 19th century, when garden cemeteries in France and America were established to create “a meaningful connection between dying on the one hand and the cosmic rhythms of nature on the other” (Mosse 1990: 114). Researchers such as Maria Piekarska (2020) are exploring how ‘environmental memorials’ create a living memorial to honor the dead and embody the natural progression of the life cycle in a way that changes over time. Just as the dynamics of remembering the deceased change over time, natural spaces never remain static (Piekarska 2020: 114). This approach not only respects ecological continuity but also personalizes remembrance by connecting the deceased to the growth and renewal of the earth. This dynamic quality of nature as ‘living matter’ (Bennett 2009, cited in Piekarska 2020) not only distinguishes environmental memorials from static stone tombstones, but also opens up new possibilities for the redesign of commemorative practices (Piekarska 2020: 103). Historically, one could also refer to the evolving memorials in Germany’s Heldenhaine (heroic forests), where planted trees symbolized individual soldiers and incorporated their memory into the natural cycle of death and renewal (Mosse 1990: 87–89).

## CONCLUSION

This article argues that people may experience the presence of the deceased through plants. I have presented three personal narratives of those who maintained lasting bonds with their significant others through plants. The deceased thus remain interwoven with the lives of the living, as people use plants, their blooming and growth, as a way to connect with them. Focusing on these personal narratives, the article departs from conventional interpretations of bereavement, which are often framed and influenced by dominant religious dogma. Instead, it adopts a phenomenological approach to better understand the everyday lives of rural communities in northeastern Slovenia.

In this article, I demonstrated that plants serve to maintain bonds between the living and the dead, manifesting different meanings and connections depending on individual perspectives. While continuing bonds with the deceased can manifest in diverse ways for any given individual, these are not limited to experiences involving plants or nature; indeed, multiple forms of continuing bonds may coexist within a single person. For Erika, the blooming cactus is the manifestation of her mother's active agency, an (intentional) sign from her; for Geza, daffodils represent his mother's attachment to flowers, which he inherited, serving as a reminder of her; for Tomaž, the magnolia tree he planted after his wife's death serves as a new manifestation of her life and a "living" tombstone.

These experiences, while not necessarily tied to religion or spiritual beliefs, emphasize relationality (Day 2012), highlighting the continuation of relationships rather than individual existence. At least in the case of Erika, beliefs in the existence and immortality of the soul are evident, yet these beliefs are not rooted in formal religious doctrine. Instead, they emerge from her personal experiences and the enduring sense of relationship she maintains with the deceased. Koski (2016) demonstrates that people interpret extraordinary experiences through various discourses, which are not only explanatory frameworks but also tools for establishing identities and relationships with the world. As in my fieldwork data, one can recognize different patterns of articulation of such experiences by different interlocutors. For example, Erika speaks of "energy" manifesting itself in the form of blooming, opening up a space for the interpretation of something beyond the material, a concept Heelas (1996) discusses, highlighting energy as central to New Age beliefs, where it is seen as a force linking the spiritual and material realms. Geza's daffodils are more than a memory of his late mother – they are a material symbol of their bond, offering continuity and connection. According to Walter (2019), Western societies tend to reduce the relationship between the living and the dead to a one-sided act of memory, leaving little room for reciprocal exchange or the sense that the deceased might still have an active presence in the lives of the living. This is why objects become crucial carriers of this relationship – not merely keepsakes, but



tangible embodiments of stories and connections. In Geza's case, the daffodils take on the role of such an object – but unlike objects that risk losing meaning, as Walter describes, the daffodils are living organisms that continuously renew and multiply. In this way, they do not merely preserve memory but allow for a recurring experience of connection with Geza's mother. Tomaž, on the other hand, associates his deceased wife with nature, which can be linked to the idea of cyclicity and connection to the natural world. This connection resonates with contemporary ecological tendencies that emphasize living in harmony with natural cycles. In this sense, the connection reflects broader environmental sensibilities, framing human life and death as integral parts of nature's continuous flow.

Our social reality is shaped by different, often contradictory views: depending on the situation, people may use different discourses that can occasionally overlap, contradict or complement each other (Koski 2016: 22).

In a broader sense, this article aims to show how people combine traditional bereavement practices with personal and contemporary ecological practices and adapt them to make meaning of their own experiences and needs. In this way, they create practices in which the natural cycle plays a key role in their interactions and memories of the dead – in particular, the symbolic message of the dead is often transmitted by the blooming of a plant. All three narratives take place at the beginning of spring, a time when nature starts to awaken and plants begin to bloom. It is important to consider the natural cycle in which these conversations occurred, as it is likely that at a different time of year, other narratives could have come to the forefront.

Practices such as planting and caring for plants allow the bereaved to connect the memory of and care for the deceased with nature and its growth cycle through activities that are necessary for the plant's survival and consequently provide a sense of continuity. In this way, they affirm that the bonds they shared do not disappear with death but are transformed into lasting and living connections.

Indeed, Strang (2023) explored natural beings and nature worship reflecting on the long-term trajectories in human relationships with the environment and emphasized that early human societies revered the creatures of nature. This belief supported cooperative and reciprocal efforts to coexist respectfully with the non-human world and enabled sustainable living. This view aligns with the idea that natural elements are not just passive parts of the environment, but active participants in people's cultural and spiritual practices. By incorporating these natural elements into rituals and daily life, people can feel a tangible connection to their deceased, reinforcing the idea that relationships with the deceased remain alive through the natural world. Without it, trees or flowers would lose this meaning and become mere landscape backdrops or decorative potted plants on the windowsill.

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## NOTE

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1 All names in this article are pseudonymized.

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# Paved-over Graveyards in Bosnia: The Agency of the Dead, Personal Experience Narratives, and Legends in the Media

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**Abstract:** In this article I discuss Bosnian Muslim narratives about traffic accidents and other misfortunes that occur in places where the dead were disturbed in their graves, transmitted orally and in the media. I first discuss vernacular notions about the dead exhibiting agency when their graves were being paved over, built over, removed or disturbed in any other way. I then discuss the roles that the narration of these stories may play for the members of the conduit. Finally, I argue that new details and interpretations that were introduced once the oral narratives entered the public media affected the overall role of the narratives about the disturbed dead – converting them from moral agents into vehicles of the ethnonationalist agenda.

**Keywords:** the dead, graves, traffic accidents, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Islam, media, nationalism

## INTRODUCTION

In the early morning of 13 May, 2000, a bus full of Muslims on the way to a celebration of Muhammad's birthday suddenly veered left on the bridge in Zli Brijeg, broke through the guardrail and plunged into the river. The accident turned out to be one of the most serious in European history: forty-three passengers died and another eleven were severely injured.<sup>1</sup> However, this was only one in a series of accidents that have occurred on this particular section of the M17 motorway since it was built in the nineteen-seventies, earning it the reputation of being one of the most dangerous roads in central Bosnia. When attempting to account for the frequency of the traffic accidents, the "rational" voices typically put the blame on the inappropriate design of the road,<sup>2</sup> drunkenness, driver inattentiveness and excessive speed. However, alternative narratives positing a "supernatural" origin of the accidents soon spread among Bosniak (Bosnian Muslim)<sup>3</sup> inhabitants of the area, which placed the blame for the accidents on the destruction of a graveyard during the construction of the motorway. These narratives further entered the print and internet media and even became the subject of a TV documentary.

This article will discuss Bosniak narratives about traffic accidents and other misfortunes that occur in places where the dead are disturbed in their graves. It is based on fieldwork conducted among the Bosniak inhabitants in the rural area of Central Bosnia in 2016, 2017, and 2024 where I conducted a total of 110 semi-structured interviews. In addition, it relies on the analysis of various media sources, that is, articles, published in a magazine *Aura*<sup>4</sup>, and various internet magazines and websites (often republishing texts from each other), as well as a documentary presented on the local TV (which until recently was accessible on a you-tube channel). I shall first discuss vernacular notions about the dead exhibiting agency when their graves were being paved-over, built-over, removed or disturbed in any other way, as discussed by my Bosniak interlocutors. I will then discuss the roles the narration of these stories may play for the members of the conduit. I will further demonstrate that once the oral narratives entered the public media, new details and interpretations were introduced that affected the message they convey. Finally, I will argue that these changes changed the overall role of the narratives about the disturbed dead – converting them from moral agents into vehicles of the ethnonationalist agenda.

## VERNACULAR KNOWLEDGE ABOUT THE AGENCY OF THE DEAD

When I first came to Central Bosnia to conduct fieldwork in 2016, traffic accidents occurring on the section of the M17 motorway in Zli Brijeg where an old graveyard had been demolished during its construction were one of the first topics that cropped up in the conversations with both the Bosniak inhabitants living in the nearby villages and also in the wider area along the motorway.



In fact, the narratives about the accidents taking place on the M17 motorway, which had been built in former socialist Yugoslavia, were intermingled with stories about accidents taking place on the other side of the valley, in the village of Karaulsko polje (Mali Brnjic), where a small graveyard had been razed too during the construction of a local road. Indeed, the site of Zli Brijeg is not the only place in central Bosnia where stories link an unusually high number of traffic accidents with graveyards that had been demolished upon the construction of roads. Apart from a few others more rarely mentioned, the section of the M17 motorway leading through the nearby village of Janjići shares the dismal reputation of Zli Brijeg, as well as stories about accidents occurring due to a demolished old graveyard. In Vogošća, a suburb of nearby Sarajevo, frequent accidents occurring on the local road are similarly associated with the former graveyard demolished in 1956.<sup>5</sup>

The discussions about the uncanny experiences at these locations are typically third-hand narratives and rumours; I have never audiotaped a first-person memorate. Some of the narratives could be classified as “ghost stories” insofar as they discuss a “ghost”, i.e., “the manifestation of the soul of the dead before the living” (Davies 2007: 2) – the emic term being “apparition” (*prikaza, ukaza*) or “it appears” (*prikazuje se, ukazuje se*) – appearing in front of the drivers in human form. In attempting to avoid hitting the apparition, they thus caused an accident:

I2: *Listen, in that village the motorway was built upon the graveyard.*  
[...]

I1: *I heard, that was not long ago, about that woman who had a car accident, this was before the bus accident took place, she drove off the road. Suddenly, she said, **a man was standing in the middle of the road.** And she put on the brakes in order not to hit him. [When she looked around,] there was no man, nobody was there anymore, God help us!*

I2: *This appears.*

I1: *A man appeared, in Zli Brijeg a man appeared, [and] the woman started to put on the brakes in order not to hit him, and the car drove off the road. (37)<sup>6</sup>*

*Then another one said that ... [he saw as if] **someone was walking with a white shroud around his back** [...] And they felt something, but what this is, only God knows... (32)*

However, not all narratives directly reveal the apparitions as the ghosts of the dead. The ghost in human form is often missing; instead, some stories refer to a *tombstone* – still a rather obvious metonym for the dead buried in the graves (see Softić 2016: 274) – or a *wall* appearing in front of the drivers:

I2: Well, people said that **tombstones** appeared in front of them. But they made this up [...].

I1: These are stories, only stories!

I2: When an accident occurs, those who survive say so. (128)

*I heard that there where there is a motorway, where there are always accidents... Suddenly something appears to them. They say that suddenly a **wall appears** in front of them. When they come across the wall, they turn around, and that's why the traffic accident [happens]. (13, 13)*

Still other narratives, however, lack any association with the dead, or with any particular visual or aural apparition for that matter. My interlocutors instead pointed to a sensation, or a temporary change of the drivers' sensory and cognitive abilities occurring at the place, which made them cause an accident:

*There was a man who was driving two kids there, on the bridge, and suddenly **it seemed to him as if something was chasing him** and he jumped off the bridge, but the kids stayed in the car [...] The children said that their dad was screaming that something was chasing him, that something was chasing him ... that is how it seemed to him. (32, 11)*

***You lose your mind. You are not aware anymore. [...] You don't even know your name. For a moment. When it's all over, you come back to yourself.** What could that be? Here's what this could be... [...] We were, me and my wife, in front of the house, nice weather, what's the name of this one, UNHCR...? [...] He ran into the embankment. That big Land Rover. Crashed into the embankment up there [pointing], God forbid! He was alone in the car. I was experienced, so I immediately took this saw and went there. A man was lying [at the bottom of the truck], he could not exit, the door was stuck. And the door where you could exit was underneath him. [I:] Are you alive? He says: I'm alive, come on, don't be afraid. And I dragged him out. I took him under my arm and brought him down here [home] – I gave him water, some sugar .... The man comes to himself a little. [...]. He lights the cigarette, my wife brings coffee. Have a drink! [I:] What's wrong with you, man? You were in the middle of the road, and you turned into the embankment? He says: I don't even know what happened to me. I'm not drunk, I'm not tired, **I just suddenly couldn't see anything**, and I drove into the embankment. See, now, if there's God's power, you have to believe! (33)*

Generally speaking, however, narratives providing a description of specific uncanny experiences that affected drivers to make them cause an accident were not common. Instead, the interlocutors usually simply associated the accidents with the destroyed graveyard, that is, with the fact that the section of the road where the accidents occur had been built at the site of the former graveyard which had been demolished upon the construction work. Instead of solitary ghosts causing accidents, it was rather the (demolished) graveyard as a whole that exhibited collective agency.

I3: *It is no good, there are always people getting killed here **because they built some structure or something on top of the dead.** [...] Because **it is not good to remove a graveyard.** [...]*

I1: *Yes, **they built the motorway upon the graves,** was that it? Yes.*

I3: *Yes, the motorway, and there were always people who got killed [there]. (22)*

[Accidents occurred] everywhere where **they dug out the graves.** Yes, people mostly die there, near Zenica [i.e., in Zli Brijeg]. Because they **went right through the middle of the graveyard. This should not be done.** (20)

I1: *The grandfather of this neighbour [pointing toward his house] died here, lots of people died, in short, they say that this happens because of this graveyard. [...] Those who survived say that this [traffic accidents] happens **because of the graves, because they moved them,** everything happens because of that.*

F: *Why? Is one not allowed to do that?*

I3: *Well, **they shouldn't have done this, remove** [the graveyard], but then – when the motorway had to be built ... (32)*

Some interlocutors furthermore specifically explained that the main reason for the accidents is to be sought in ill-treatment of the bodily remains which, instead of being properly reburied at another location, were simply left there and paved over. This, indeed, would literally make the place a “paved-over graveyard”, and the bones of the dead being continuously run over, again and again disturbed in their post-mortem life.

I3: *Well, traffic accidents. A lot of traffic accidents, there was allegedly a cemetery here. And now this cemetery has been disturbed, and a motorway leads over [it]. And **a lot of bones were left here** and there is something, something is.... [...]*

F: *But why should this have any influence?*

13: Well, maybe **there are graves that remained, bones, post-mortem remains.** (19)

*Listen, in the village just near ours, the motorway goes through the graveyard. And down here too, the graveyard was moved due to the motorway. And [...] traffic accidents happened there, lots of people got killed. And children were killed on the motorway too. A lot of this [happened] down here. But, now since the workers found these tombs and moved them up, to proper graves, buried them and provided them with a funeral and made sacrifices [kurban],<sup>7</sup> nothing [happens] anymore. [...] Everything is back to normal.* (37, 11)

Burying the dead, in most cultures, is certainly considered a duty of the living. Only through complete funeral rituals can the dead be properly transferred from one status to another, i.e., from the society of the living to the society of the dead (Pentikäinen 1969: 95; Gustavsson 2008: 25; Cowdell 2011: 54, 59). For Bosnian Muslims, this is not only a legal but also a religious obligation (Sokolović 1972), and only after the corpse is buried can the soul “find peace”, my Bosniak interlocutors often emphasised. While in this case the dead had in the past been buried, their dug-out bodily remains should nevertheless be reburied with the accompanying rituals and prayers, my religiously educated interlocutor from Sarajevo explained (see also Jusić 2007: 25–27):

*Of course, I mean ... when a road is being built, of course it [the graveyard] needs to be relocated, but relocating as such is not a problem. The problem is in the approach to relocating a cemetery. So, there is a code in Islam on how it can be done. You have to slaughter the sacrifices [kurban], you have to ask permission from the dead [...], you have to apologize to those dead, as if they were alive. [...] So, if it has to be done, and sometimes it has to be done, it is allowed [to transfer the bodies], but there is, brother, a code of conduct, how to move them! You can't take the bones and throw them around as if they were dogs!* (242)

In fact, explanations attributing the underlying cause of accidents to the destruction of the graves upon the construction of the road, or alternatively, to bodily remains that had been left and paved over instead of being ritually reburied, often overlap and are sometimes even offered by the same interlocutor. Indeed, underlying both explanations is the same notion that the dead should not be disturbed, and if they are, they will cause misfortunes. The prohibition to disturb the graves in any way – by paving them over, building anything, or even walking over them, let alone driving over them – was strongly condemned by all my Bosniak interlocutors (see Mencej 2025). “Disturbing the

dead is as if disturbing the living. This is a sin,” Džemal<sup>8</sup> explained, and Razija elaborated further: “The dead feel everything, their whole body, every bone aches when they are moved.”<sup>9</sup>

The prohibition against disturbing the dead is in fact explicitly addressed in *Islam* which is generally adhered to in the area: to disturb the dead, even by sitting on their graves or walking over them, is considered *haram*, i.e., a forbidden act.<sup>10</sup> The Prophet himself was said to have at first forbade even visiting graves, in order to prevent the deceased from being disturbed (Sokolović 1972: 64–65; Schimmel 2001: 105). In one of the hadiths,<sup>11</sup> Muhammad, upon seeing Omar Ibn Hizaam leaning against a grave, was said to have discouraged him from doing so, saying: “Do not harm [molest] the occupant of this grave.” [Reported by Imaam Ahmad] In another hadith, he was alleged to say: “Do not sit on the graves, and do not pray facing them” [Reported by Imaam Muslim and others] (Book 5, Hadith 193; Book 21, Hadith 141; see also Hadith 140 below). A narrative from the prominent twelfth-century Persian philosopher al-Ghazali conveys a similar warning against visiting graveyards: “For a long time I was praying by the grave of my father. One day, in a time of terrible heat, I saw a person on a grave who looked like my father, so I became frightened, but this person said to me: ‘Poor you to upset us all this time by your praying!’” (el-Ghazali 1998: 44–45). Later in his life, however, the Prophet changed his mind and even encouraged people to visit graveyards, with the aim to cultivate piety (Sokolović 1972: 65–66; cf. Schimmel 2001: 105; Idleman Smith & Haddad Yazbeck 2002 [1981]: 51; Campo 2004: 175).

Institutional Islam, on the other hand, does not acknowledge post-mortem “life” of the dead and their agency. The dead causing traffic accidents and other misfortunes when their grave is disturbed is therefore not something that official Islam would approve. In contrast, in vernacular notions,<sup>12</sup> to disturb the dead is not only considered a prohibited act, but the consequences, anticipated if it were carried out, are specified too: the souls of the dead whose grave was “disturbed” are thus expected to torment those who committed such an immoral deed and cause various misfortunes. As the Bosnian folklorist Aiša Softić writes, there is a “deeply rooted folk belief that any disturbing of the dead will be followed by punishment in the form of an illness, often also imminent death” (2016: 272–280).

To disturb the graves, and consequently the peace of the dead in them, is therefore considered a deviation not only from legal, and religious, but also from moral norms of proper behaviour towards the dead, and the traffic accidents are understood as a consequence, an anticipated punishment for their violation. This does not necessarily affect the transgressors themselves; insofar as the place of the former graveyard is informed by this violation, *any* human being finding themselves at this place can suffer the consequences. In vernacular notions, the dead are thus understood as (moral) agents who react when a moral norm is threatened and consequently warn against its violation

(see Honko 1991 [1962]: 98, 116–118ff; Stewart 1991: 189; Valk 2006: 33–34; Tófalvy & Viciana 2009: 231; Nyce & Talja & Dekker 2015: 85). Contrary to the Irish narratives discussed by Harlow who – seeking to uncover the principles of interconnectedness that enabled and encouraged the juncture of oral ghost stories to local tragedies – argued that ghost stories resonate with accounts of disruptive events in people’s lives and thus help to interpret the local tragedies with which they are linked (Harlow 1993), the connection between the “ghosts” and the tragedies in Bosnia is not only symbolic but *causal*. When the dead feature in these narratives (explicitly or implicitly), they exhibit agency that affects the living: it is them, it is generally thought, who actually *trigger* the accidents.

### NARRATING STORIES ABOUT THE DEAD CAUSING TRAFFIC ACCIDENTS

While my interlocutors in the narratives presented above addressed vernacular knowledge about the agency of the dead who retaliated against the moral misbehaviour, they can also be observed from a narratological perspective. One cannot but notice that to a certain degree at least they are patterned in a recognisable way and include motifs that have been identified as belonging to the international folklore basin. The motif of the dead causing misfortunes when their graves are disturbed belongs to the stock of international folklore (see Thompson motifs E235. *Return from dead to punish indignities to corpse, or ghost*; E235.6. *Return from the dead to punish disturber of grave*). Legends worldwide tell of sites at which this prohibition against disturbing the dead was violated and which thus became haunted places, often triggering various sorts of misfortunes, not necessarily (only) traffic accidents (see, for instance, Fialkova 2001: 197; Ellis 2003: 187; Davies 2007: 50–51; Goldstein & Grider & Banks Thomas 2007: 208–209). Indeed, even in the Balkans, stories about the dead causing traffic accidents were not only attached to the places inhabited by a predominantly Muslim population. Several sections at the A3/E70 motorway Zagreb – Belgrade that were also built over gravesites by youth work brigades, in the area where Christianity is the dominant religion, likewise became known as haunted places that trigger accidents. A journalist who wrote about the traffic accidents occurring along the Zagreb–Belgrade motorway thus argued that the reason for them is precisely the disrespect shown by the socialist youth towards the graves:

*The builders didn't care if there was a cemetery on the motorway route, they simply built the road over it. This is why a large number of traffic accidents are linked to the "disturbing of the dead". During the construction of the motorway, many crosses and tombstones were thrown into the roadbed and paved over! The youths who built*



*it mocked the graves and crosses, not even respecting the dead!*  
(Lepan 2013)

Indeed, the narratives about traffic accidents in Zli Brijeg occasionally even intermingled with an internationally spread type of contemporary (migratory) legend “Vanishing hitchhiker” (see, for instance, Brunvand 2003 [1981]: 24–46; 2002: 463–465; Bennett 1998). This is how Aldijana, living in the vicinity of Zli Brijeg, explained what caused the horrible accident discussed above:

*I: That's the incident [near Zlijeg Brijeg]. When the bus left for Mostar, maybe twenty years ago, they were supposed to go to Buna but it was allegedly cancelled that day. What happened? .... [thinking] The bus allegedly landed down there. And it was like a woman appeared there.*

*F: To the bus driver?*

*I: Yes. Like, he stopped, she hitchhiked, she disappeared from the car, what do I know, there were stories like this. Like a guy goes, a girl hitchhikes, and he takes her in and what now happens to him... [trying to remember]? She simply disappears while he's driving, leaving only her scarf (hidjab) behind. That were stories, yes. This was told for a while [that] it was appearing. Like, she was killed here once, in this place. (interlocutor 043, interview MM035a)*

Moving from discussing the underlying vernacular ideas about the agency of the dead, and their moral charge, one can also discuss these narratives from the perspective of the role the narration of these stories may serve for the members of the conduit. Certainly, these stories have a didactic role: they confirm (vernacular)religious moral notions that the dead in graves should not be disturbed, but also warn that a breach in moral behaviour cannot go unpunished. One could further argue that these stories offer a platform for the local population to address collective anxieties triggered by the destruction of the graveyards and disrespectful attitudes of road builders towards graveyards. Workers in the 1970s built the motorway under the communist regime which, of course, did not consider such “superstitious beliefs” about the prohibition to disturb the dead worth paying attention to. Realisation that the moral norms they have adhered to have been thoroughly violated must have produced tensions, and narrating these stories, even listening to them, has offered a platform to address the anxieties, and at least to some extent also to release them. Moreover, when narratives about uncanny experiences are “shared with licence” (cf. Ellis 1988: 66–67), they can be used strategically to one’s benefit (see Narváez 1991: 354–357; Devlin 1987: 88; Mencej 2023). The stories in question may thus serve as a suitable reference for people to save face. As my interlocutor Zino explained, by referring to uncanny phenomena that they allegedly

experienced, some drivers tried to excuse their role in causing the accident and absolve themselves of guilt, at least in public:

*A tombstone appears. Here, there is that policeman from Z. who is still alive, his wife and son were killed, but he is still alive. One also appeared in front of him [...] on the road. That's what he says, but [...] that's a story! You're not supposed to drive more than sixty kilometres per hour down there, and he was driving two hundred! And when you stay alive, you invent something so that, you see, you would not be deemed guilty. (128, 12)*

But while oral narration of these stories may offer the narrators a platform to release their anxieties, and thus some consolation, knowing that the immoral deeds have been rightfully punished, or even a tool that can be strategically used, these narratives, when mediated orally, have never been instrumentalised to mediate a particular ideological agenda. This, however, is precisely what turned out to be the case when they entered Bosniak popular media and digital platforms, as I will argue below. But before discussing the agenda that these legends convey when transmitted by the media and internet, let me first present the articles about the (disturbed) dead in this new channel of transmission and point out their specific features that distinguish them from orally transmitted stories, the changes that they have undergone within the new conduit.

## NARRATIVES ABOUT TRAFFIC ACCIDENTS IN THE MEDIA

Narratives about mysterious, uncanny and extraordinary phenomena have always been rather enticing for readers of popular media, and the Bosniak magazine *Aura*, launched in 2002 and advertised as “a magazine for alternative medicine and culture of life”, as well as various internet magazines, and other websites<sup>13</sup> have shown a great deal of interest in stories about the mysterious phenomena occurring at places where the dead have been disturbed. Moreover, the uncanny phenomena in Zli Brijeg even became the topic of a documentary in a local TV series called *Slučajevi X* (“X-Files”). Yet contrary to the oral narratives which relate the traffic accidents at particular spots with the demolition of the graveyards, media tends to enhance their overall uncanniness and gruesome character and proclaim the places to be “cursed” and “enchanted”. The title of the article on the accidents in Janjići in *Aura*, for instance, announces: “Janjići near Zenica – Enchanted place on the M17 motorway. Every year about 30 dead in nearly a thousand traffic accidents!?” (Aljović & Šehović 2008: 16; *Misterije>whistler<*). Zli Brijeg similarly features not only as a place of frequent traffic accidents caused by the dead from the demolished graveyards but as the “most sinister place”, a place “hiding a tormented and tragic history”. Since ancient times it has allegedly also been a place of highwaymen attacking,

robbing and killing passing merchants and ambushing passers-by, of processions of wedding guests killing each other,<sup>14</sup> of many deaths of people being run over by a train on the old Austrian railway leading through the valley, and victims that fell in World War II. All these dead, not only those disturbed by the demolition of their graves, we can read, have resulted in the numerous “apparitions” encountered by the local population (Aljović & Šehović 2008: 16; Misterije>whistler<).

Even in cases where the media present both arguments for the cause of the accidents, i.e., the “rational” explanation – excessive speed, poor layout of the roads, alcohol, and driver inattentiveness – and the alternative, “supernatural” one, which finds the ultimate cause of the accidents in the disturbing of the dead, the former is subtly concluded to be insufficient to account for the number of accidents occurring at these places. The journalists at Aura, referring to the accidents in Janjići, thus write: “Statisticians make records of the traffic accidents and of the number of victims. No one, however, deeply engages in the many mysterious and incomprehensible details of the victims of traffic accidents [...] Their passing seriously makes us at least shake our heads in doubt [...]” (Aljović & Šehović 2008: 19). They further present a statement from the policeman who was found liable for the traffic accident in which his wife died (see interlocutor 128 above), arguing that he caused the accident because a white tombstone had appeared in his lane, implying the inadequacy of the “rational” explanation: “Every accident in Janjići reminds me of the evening when I lost my wife. Therefore, I find it somewhat difficult to observe the police always blaming the drivers. There is something else here ...” (Aljović & Šehović 2008: 17). This interpretation is further corroborated by “material evidence that there were old graves which were demolished during the construction of the M17 motorway,” and we read that “while *cars rush over the bones of the dead* [emphasis mine], the souls and hearts of several thousand people get wounded every year due to the loss or serious injuries of their loved ones” (Ibid.).

These stories, moreover, are not only presented to the readers as providing an alternative interpretation of the cause of the accidents, but instead as imbued with authority and the value of their bearers’ – “folk’s” – wisdom. “*Folk says* [emphasis mine] that the bones should not be moved”, we read on the Misterije>whistler< website. Similarly in Aura: “While official institutions blame drivers who do not adapt to the driving conditions, *folk is talking* more and more loudly of a curse. Even religious employees have become interested in and inquire about what *folk recorded in their legends*” [emphasis mine].

The trustworthiness imparted to folk narratives about the “supernatural” origin of the traffic accidents is significant. It allows the journalists to take the next step: placing the “supernatural” phenomena occurring at these places into the general framework of *religion*, more specifically, Islam. The journalists’ commentary emphasizes the association of the accidents with Islam in several ways, thus giving them a new meaning and deeper significance within

an Islamic context. The time the accidents occur, for instance, is imparted a special meaning within the *Islamic religious calendar* and the cycle of Muslim daily prayers: “[It] is interesting to note that most of the traffic accidents in this place occurred in the period of some of the (Muslim) prayers [*namaz*]<sup>15</sup> or some of the blessed [*mubarek*] nights. The most recent accident [...] occurred during the blessed night of Lejletul-Berat. According to Islam, [this is] the night when the supreme God determines the fate of people for the following year” (Aljović & Šehović 2008: 18–19). *Islamic prayer* is suggested as a means of providing consolation for victims, whose families, as we read, “[i]n order to dull the edge of that pain, [...] shed a tear, and give a (Muslim) prayer [*predaju rahmet ili ‘pokoј’*] for those who suffered death to rest in peace.” In searching for the true cause of the frequent accidents, the journalists at Aura addressed an *Islamic religious specialist*. An imam, also a *hafiz*,<sup>16</sup> knowledgeable in religious matters, confirms that the fact that the graveyard was demolished upon the construction of the motorway might be the true cause of the frequent accidents at this location. While he is hesitant to give this explanation priority, he nevertheless refers to the interdiction against disturbing the dead by citing *Islamic* hadith, conveying Muhammad’s words: “It is better for one of you to sit on a piece of burning coal that would burn his clothes than penetrate to his flesh, than to sit on a grave” (Aljović & Šehović 2008: 19; cf. Sunan Abi Dawud 3228, Book 21, Hadith 140: <https://sunnah.com/abudawud:3228>; last accessed on 1 April 2025).

This placing of the traffic accident narratives within a religious framework by the media is rather innovative when compared to the narratives in oral circulation. While Islam, as discussed above, undoubtedly strongly informs people’s everyday life in Bosnia, the local population have not generally made an explicit connection between the accidents, the demolished graves and Islamic teachings.<sup>17</sup> Instead, it was rather the consequences of the prohibited deed, and the agency of the dead, understood within the framework of vernacular religious notions that were in the focus of their attention.

There is, furthermore, an additional, religiously-tinged innovation in the stories published in the media: the suggestion that the demolished graves were not just any graves but those of *shehids* [Bosnian *šehid*, pl. *šehidi*, from the Arabic *shahid*], i.e., “martyrs fallen while fighting on God’s path”, that is, sacrificing their life for Islam.<sup>18</sup> The TV documentary from 2014 focusing on the traffic accidents taking place in Zli Brijeg thus includes an interview with a local inhabitant who stated that “something like shehids died” [*neki ko šehidi da su umrli*] there. In Aura, one similarly reads that “according to the locals, the location of the motorway passing through Janjići used to be full of shehids’ tombstones, which were demolished upon the construction of the motorway,” and that “during the period of Islamisation of this part of Bosnia, the shehids, after having their heads severed in battle, took them into their arms and died in Janjići” (Aljović & Šehović 2008: 18).

Legends about shehids whose heads were severed in fights but who took them into their arms and carried them for a time<sup>19</sup> before falling to the ground and dying are indeed a part of traditional Bosniak folklore, and are as a rule associated with anonymous tombstones or mausoleums (*turbeta*) (see Hangi 1907 [1906]: 224; cf. also Suša & Trgo 1997; Palavestra 2004: 491–494; Softić 2005: 51–53, 170). In contrast with the media, however, no interlocutor from the villages around Zli Brijeg or in Janjići that I have spoken with has ever confirmed that the graves demolished upon the construction of the motorway belonged to shehids who died on the Bosnian soil during the Ottoman period. It is difficult to judge whether the difference is due to different interlocutors that we interviewed,<sup>20</sup> or whether the idea of the shehids was deliberately introduced by the journalists. However, I did manage to locate the local who had (rather hesitantly) stated in the TV documentary that shehids' graves had been demolished in Zli Brijeg. When asked about his statement, he explicitly denied that the graves had belonged to shehids. This likely indicates that it was the journalists who may have suggested to him to introduce the shehids in the first place.

## LEGENDS ABOUT THE CONSEQUENCES OF DISTURBING THE DEAD IN THE MEDIA

To fully understand the meaning of the changes and the overall religious framework within which the narratives about traffic accidents have been discussed in the media, we should also take into consideration other articles that appear in the media and address the prohibition against disturbing the dead in their graves, and the consequences that ensue when this is violated. The article about traffic accidents in *Aura* (often partly and completely reprinted in various internet magazines, websites and Facebook accounts) is in fact just one segment of an entire body of articles that address the prohibition against disturbing the dead. Only by considering the narratives about traffic accidents within the entire body of folk legends about the disturbed dead introduced by the media can we properly understand the meaning and rationale underlying the media's renditions of folk narratives about traffic accidents in Zli Brijeg, Janjići and Vogošća.

Like the articles on traffic accidents, other articles that tackle the act of disturbing of the graves also tend to be imbued with religious connotations. Moreover, most articles in *Aura* contain at least implicit, if not explicit, condemnation of the disturbing of the dead, grounded in Islamic faith (see Hadži-ahmetović 2005: 24–25). Coming across a new settlement of houses, allegedly built “upon the bones and the last ‘house’ of once living human beings”, the journalist in *Aura* is outraged at people who dare to build their houses upon the graves, accusing them of having no fear of God. Thunderstruck, he asks rhetorically: “Can there ever be happiness [*hajr*] in those houses? If they [i.e. people who built the house upon a grave] don't respect the dead, do people fear



God, the devil, nature... anything?! Such an act renders one speechless” (Jusić 2007: 25–27). The journalist’s emphasising the faith of his interviewee, who had allegedly built a house over a grave, implies that his act is considered a violation of religious, rather than (merely) social and legal norms of behaviour: “I asked him,” the author writes, “how he could dare to build a house at this place, as I knew that *he believes in God, and that his family is the same*” (Jusić 2007: 26; emphasis mine). In another article, we read of a woman who was experiencing chronic terrifying uncanny experiences and was suffering various sorts of psychological problems because she lived “in a house which was built upon a graveyard.” Luckily, we get to know that “the ghosts which had been troubling her for years *calmed down forever after verses from the holy Qur’an were recited*” (E. K. 2008: 68, emphasis mine).

Stories about demolished graves discussed in the media sometimes also make reference to demolished Islamic sacred buildings and places to which the graves were attached. According to an article in *Aura*, the building of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina in the centre of Sarajevo, completed in 1886, was originally built in 1561 over a *musalla*, a place “for Islamic prayer”, and the wider complex, which also included a mosque and a graveyard, built “under the sign of Islamic religion, tradition and spirituality”. As the author comments, “a place of spiritual life and progress has been replaced by its total opposite. If one also takes into account the fact that there was a cemetery there, then it is not surprising that the entire building may be ‘cursed’”. Indeed, the consequences of the prohibited act are not only personal but also political. The highlighted moral of the article teaches us: “It is not good to build houses, business facilities and other buildings on a cemetery! Ask yourself why there are non-stop problems in the building of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, but also in the country of Bosnia and Herzegovina, what are the reasons for so much disagreement and problems faced by our politicians?” At the end of the article, the warning is repeated: “What do you think is the reason for so much disagreement and problems that our politicians are facing? It is not that all these people are that bad, but the souls of the dead do not give them peace and cause troubles among them. [...] Unfortunately, we do not pay attention to this, and this is a great danger, therefore, my dears, listen to the advice – when you build or buy a house, inquire carefully about the location” (Unknown author 2013: 51–52). *Aura* also presents the legend from Tuzla of a certain merchant who started to build a house; however, everything that was built during the day was demolished over the night. This went on for a while until one day he heard that this was happening because the house was being built upon the grave of a shehid. When he left the site of the grave undisturbed and built the house around it, everything was fine – in fact, the shehid has since become the protector of the whole town (Dramalija 2013).

Several articles, discussing the prohibited disturbing of shehids’ graves, emphasise the resistance of the shehids’ tombstones to being (re)moved.



When villagers tried to straighten up a shehid's tombstone, the author writes, "a miracle occurred": the heavy steel chain which they were using to lift the tombstone snapped like a thread. She then concludes: "From a villager we heard a firm belief that there is no machine in the world that could move the [shehid's] tombstone" (Balić 2008). Indeed, the shehids, we read, are immovable and can prevent anything from being built over them, even a mausoleum erected in their honour (Bender 2005: 28–29).

Articles referring to folk legends also focus on the punishments visited on those who attempt to disturb shehids' (sometimes overlapping with *evlijas*'<sup>21</sup>) graves: "They say that everyone who laid hands on the grave of Bajraktar [a shehid from Kamengrad – M. M.] suffered God's punishment. During World War II, the tomb was defiled twice; both perpetrators died soon afterwards. In the last war an explosive was placed under the sarcophagus but didn't explode. The man who placed it suffered a heart attack, but the tomb remained intact" (Z. Č. 2003: 36–37). We can also read legends about shehids who caused death (Hadžimuhamedović 2005; Bajramović 2006) or hail (Dedić 2008) when their graves or mausoleums were disturbed.

Neglecting their graves is strongly condemned: "It is a sin and haram for many souls that this mausoleum [built over a shehid's grave – M. M.] is being neglected" (Karić 2005: 33). Indeed, the journalists sometimes even turned into "activists" themselves, fighting for the proper protection of the shehids' (and *evlijas*') graves. When told by the villagers that the new urban plan included a road that would be constructed over the grave which allegedly belonged to a shehid, they actively engaged in the villagers' fight against it. Although experts from the Institute for the Protection of Cultural and Historical Monuments in Sarajevo whom they had consulted in the matter claimed that there was no record of any Muslim grave at this location in the archives, the journalist made the local assistant director of civil engineering projects promise that "no grave, no matter whose it is, will ever again be ploughed over or removed" (E. M. 2004: 31; cf. also M. Ž. 2004: 22–23).

Taking all of these articles into consideration, we can see that the legends condemning the disturbing of the graves (especially those of shehids and *evlijas*) and discussing the consequences of the violation of this prohibition are generally rather popular among journalists. Likewise, the religiously informed changes to the folk narratives about the traffic accidents made by the media are not limited to these narratives: the emphasis on Islam is also common in articles presenting other belief narratives about disturbed graves. Finally, one may ask why the legends about disturbed graves, and their consequences, have been so readily embraced by the media, and moreover, why have they acquired religious tone, connotations, figures and interpretations in the media that they lack when narrated orally? While uncanny phenomena are undoubtedly appealing to the readers of this type of popular media, this, I argue, is not the only, or even the main reason for their being embraced by the Bosnian popular

media. Instead, in the next section I will argue that the reason for their inclusion in the media lies primarily in their usefulness for the promotion of a particular ideological agenda.

## THE DEAD AND GRAVES IN NATIONALIST IMAGININGS

To understand why narratives on the dead and graves are so readily embraced by the Bosniak media, it is important to understand their role in broader social processes. As Anderson demonstrated, the dead, and graves, play a significant role in national “imaginings” (1992 [1983]: 9–10; see also Ashplant & Dawson & Roper 2000: 7–8). Katherine Verdery has argued that the connection among kinship, burial, nationalism and soil is potent and widespread, especially in post-Yugoslav countries where kinship structures are highly salient (1999: 26, 41–53, 103–106). Indeed, the notions of death, the dead, graves, ossuaries and killing grounds became particularly common in the political discourse in the 1980s and 1990s, when, upon Yugoslavia’s disintegration, ethnonationalist processes gained momentum in the ex-Yugoslav republics. In the nationalist discourse, as Čolović demonstrated, the graves of the unknown dead of the same ethnonational group were transformed into the “womb of the ethnonational community”. Moreover, the “ancestors’” graves “laid out a geography of territorial claims” and became symbolic markers of the national territory, not necessarily restricted to its political borders (Čolović 2015: 108–109; see also Verdery 1999: 101–111). Similarly, the notion of the “spiritual territory of the nation” in the political discourse implied the land of the “ethnically pure” dead, i.e. the territory marked by traces of national history and culture, such as the sites of battles, ossuaries, graves, etc. (Čolović 2015: 48–54). In such nationalist discourse, the dead are therefore not “just” the dead bodies or spirits but are raised to the status of the “ancestors of the nation”. The dead buried in the Muslim graveyards, especially old ones, represent the *ancestors* of the Bosniak nation, and it is this, I argue, that is the main reason for the media’s pointed interest in the legends discussed here. The comment of a journalist making an appeal to the readers of *Aura* clearly illustrates this: “Personally, I would not even build a future home for myself and my family on the bones of a dog, let alone on *the graves of my ancestors*” (Jusić 2007: 25–27; emphasis mine).

This symbolic framework allows for the exploitation not only of the links with the unknown dead and their graves, but also with glorious heroes and martyrs of the past (cf. Petrović 2000: 173). In the nationalist discourse, the national heroes “occupy the place of clan elders in defining a nation as a noble lineage” (Verdere 1999: 41), and their graves, tombstones, chapels and mau-soleums symbolically mark the national territory (Čolović 2015: 109). The replacement of the graves of “ordinary” dead with those of shehids, and the introduction of the legends about the shehids, i.e. religious heroes who died fighting for Islam, but also those of *evlija*-s, *Dobri*, the “ideal Muslims”, should

thus come as no surprise. Even less so as shehids play a significant role in the nation-building and re-Islamisation processes in Bosnia and Herzegovina since the war in the 1990s. While no folk legend mentions shehids as fighting for Islam (Softić 2002: 115), but focus instead only on their death in battle, their religious role is emphasised in a popular magazine (see Mencej 2019) as well as in political discourse. While the graves of shehids used to play a role in vernacular practices,<sup>22</sup> since the beginning of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina (1992–1995) their symbolic power, Bougarel argues, has been subjected to considerable changes in political, and to a lesser extent in popular discourse. In April 1992, the Bosnian Islamic Community started labelling the Bosnian Muslims who were killed fighting the Yugoslav People's Army and Serb paramilitaries as shehids, "chosen by Allah among the best believers". Moreover, the leaders of the Party for Democratic Action (*Stranka za demokratsku akciju* – SDA) endeavoured to apply the term shehid to *all* Muslim war victims, not only Muslim believers (Bougarel 2016 [2007]: 168–177). Contrary to the pre-war vernacular cult of shehids, the "new" cult, according to Bougarel, has not been a spontaneous phenomenon, but an authoritarian one, imposed on the Bosniak population from "above" – more precisely, by the Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the SDA – to participate in nation-building and re-Islamisation processes initiated during the war (Bougarel 2002, 2016 [2007]; Maček 2016 [2007]). The shehid, an embodiment of "the Muslim and Islamic credo" and a symbol of "the Islamisation of Bosnia" (Bringa 1995: 176, 196), has thus played an important role in the transformation of Bosniak ethnonational identity. It has served political projects and practices, with which political and religious leaders "strove to impose their own conception of Islam and definition of Muslim ethnonational identity upon a largely secular population" (Bougarel 2016 [2007]: 170).

To understand why the legends about traffic accidents as the consequences of disturbed graves in the media are – in contrast to their oral counterparts – placed within an overall religious framework, and why Muslim heroes and "saints" (*evlijas*) have been singled out as embodiments of Muslim identity, it is important to remember that in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as elsewhere in the Balkans, religion has been the most important and persistent factor in the formation of ethno-national identity. In the late eighties and early nineties, when the political situation in the former Yugoslavia triggered ethno-nationalist as well as re-Christianisation and re-Islamisation processes, among the Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats religious elements became crucial in the process of "the ethnification of politics and the politicisation of the ethnic" (Velikonja 2002: 196). Since they could not construct any differentiation among their ethno-national identifications on the basis of language, political unity or territorial cohesion, religion became the basis for collective identification (Velikonja 1998: 18–22; 2002; Andjelić 2012). While according to a survey taken in 1988 only about 38% of Muslims, 19% of Serbs and 56% of Croats in Bosnia and

Herzegovina considered themselves to be religious, after the disintegration of the former Yugoslavia and the consequent war, political developments evolved in the direction of increasing ethno-national and religiously-tinged political pluralism, the de-privatisation of religion, and religious-nationalist mythic constructs (Velikonja 1998: 279, 286–289, 312–313; Petrović 2000: 171–174). Squeezed between Serbian and Croatian nationalist interests, Muslims thus began to reinforce their ethno-national identity by emphasizing Sunni Islam – with its cultural heritage, historical legacy, set of practices and moral values – as the main constitutive factor of a collective identity that distinguished Bosniaks from Catholic Bosnian Croats and Orthodox Bosnian Serbs (Bringa 1995: 7–11, 197–198; Velikonja 1998: 308).

Viewed from the perspective of the role that the dead, graves and religion play in ethno-nationalist identity processes, the media's articles on misfortunes that ensue as the consequence of the removal, demolition, paving over, building over or in any other way disturbing the dead seem neither coincidental nor entirely "innocent". Within this framework, the eradication of (Muslim) graves and the removal of the dead (Muslim) bodies, or their substitutes (tombstones) in the legends can be understood as symbolically representing (the threat of) the eradication and removal of the Muslim ethno-national community at large from the Bosnian soil (see Mencej 2019). The reason for the inclusion of legends about disturbing the dead and their religious interpretation in the media therefore seems to lie specifically in the usefulness of these legends to the furthering of ethno-national identity processes in contemporary Bosnian society.

## CONCLUSION

Throughout history, folklore has been drawn upon and exploited to serve nationalist, but also other ideological, political, economic, etc. goals, and the interests of various social, political and other groups, institutions and structures (see, for instance, Kamenetsky 1972, 1977; Dégh 1984; Fine 1985; Alver 1989; Oring 1994; Niles 1999: 66–67, 87–88; Mullen 2000: 136; Ellis 2017). Folklore has also been shown to have been instrumental in the ethno-nationalist processes in ex-Yugoslavia. Politicians often resorted to folklore forms, motifs and characters, implying that they express the will of the "folk", in order to legitimize political and military endeavours and with the intention to use them to arouse patriotic and military feelings (Čolović 1994: 83–92, 145ff; see also Žanić 1998; Rihtman Augustin 1998; 2001: 89, 93). While ghost stories and other legends discussed in this article certainly fit with the popular media's interest in "breaking" events and tragic, extraordinary, inexplicable, mysterious phenomena, I have argued here that they were published in Bosniak popular magazine *Aura* so frequently, in particular in the period 2003–2008, particularly due to their ideological charge rather than due to the audience being

drawn to their uncanny appeal. The narratives about the dead exhibiting agency when their graves are disturbed, which in oral transmission reinforce obedience to the moral norms of proper respect for the dead, and their narration may help release the anxieties triggered when these are violated, or be used to save face, are used in the media to reinforce religious norms. They become vehicles in the process of the reinforcement of the Muslim religious and ethno-national identity of the population in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In this sense, it is not insignificant that the majority of the readers of *Aura*, in which these legends were published, are Bosniaks, and that the owner of the publishing house issuing the magazine was until 2012 (when he sold it to his ex-wife) the Bosniak journalist, entrepreneur and politician Fahrudin Radončić, the founder of the Bosniak political conservative right wing party *Savez za bolju budućnost BiH*.

Let me conclude this paper with an excerpt from an article published in *Aura* that perhaps most explicitly illustrates my point about political instrumentalization of folklore. The “ghost” story discussed in the article takes place at the military barracks built upon the family grave of the Muslim Ćebo family, some members of which were brutally murdered by *chetniks*<sup>23</sup> and others by the Communist government. As the story goes, one night an apparition of a “cursed man without a nose” suddenly for a few moments appeared to a soldier on guard and warned him that if he “didn’t have what he had in the pocket by his heart, he would never leave the place again.” What saved his life, the journalist explains, was a talisman with verses from Qur’an which the soldier carried in the pocket of his shirt. Moments later, the story continues, “another figure in human form appeared”, this time an “extremely pleasant looking” one, with a recognizable Muslim attribute – an *ahmedija*, a thin cloth wrapped around a cap (*fez*) on his head, worn by Islamic religious leaders and dignitaries. Greeting him with, among Bosniaks today, the common Muslim religious salutation *Selam*, he promised the soldier that he would punish the apparition without a nose for upsetting him. The story concludes with the journalist enlightening the readers with the explanation of the “true” meaning of the miraculous event, the “message” that the story allegedly “conveys to the Bosniak people”: the experience, he explains, is related to the awakening of the (dead) Muslim family, who “in this way command the Bosniaks to turn to religion and unity” (Sarajlić 2003: 16–17).

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## NOTES

- 1 <http://www.klix.ba/vijesti/svijet/autobuska-nesreca-kod-kaknja-medju-najtezim-u-evropi-u-posljednje-23-godine/130709057>; [https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=744744612218104&id=408561169169785](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=744744612218104&id=408561169169785).
- 2 I have been told that since an additional lane was built in Zli Brijeg a few years ago, the number of accidents has diminished significantly.
- 3 While in the first three censuses after World War II, people who are now officially called Bosniaks (*Bošnjaci*) were treated as a religious group, i.e. Muslims (and were counted in national terms as Serbs, Croats, Yugoslavians or Undeclared), which rendered them politically invisible (Markowitz 2010: 53); at the end of the 1960s/beginning of the 1970s they gained the status of a nationality: "Muslim" was now a national rather than a religious category. The ambiguity of using the term Muslim to refer to the national identity was avoided by writing it with an initial capital (*Muslim-ani*) while referring to members of the religious community with a lowercase initial (*muslimani*). In this way, Yugoslav socialist policy implicitly denied the dependency of the national category on religious identity (Velikonja 1998: 267–272; Norris 1993: 254; Bringa 1995: 9–10).
- 4 I analysed all issues from 2002 to 2017.
- 5 The location of the accidents in Vogošća, however, does not correspond entirely to the site of a previous graveyard – this was destroyed upon the construction of the parking lot near the Tas and Pretis factories, located by the road, and the Čardak restaurant, located some ten metres further up the road, while the accidents actually occur along the section between the Čardak restaurant and the bus stop further down the road. The narratives nevertheless associate the accidents with the demolition of the graves.
- 6 I in the interviews indicates an Interlocutor, and F a folklorist, i.e. me. The number in the brackets after the interviews refers to the number of the interview in the archive kept at the Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology, University of Ljubljana.
- 7 A ritual sacrifice of a calf or a young ram.
- 8 All names are pseudonyms. Interview MM051, interlocutor 064.
- 9 Interview MM049, interlocutor 060.
- 10 <https://islamqa.info/en/answers/4309/it-is-not-permissible-to-show-any-kind-of-disrespect-towards-graves>.
- 11 An account of the words, actions, and habits of the Islamic prophet.
- 12 Islam was only introduced to the population of today's Bosnia and Herzegovina in the 15th century, which provided scope for syncretism with Slavic pagan ideas and practices as well as the vernacular Christianity of Bosnian Orthodox Serbs and Catholic Croats. In addition, the Sunni Islam of the Hanafi school of jurisprudence, to which the Bosnian Muslims belong, is the most open school of thought within Islam, and this together with the influence of Sufi mysticism in Central Bosnia (Bringa 1995: 174) resulted in vernacular ideas and forms of religiosity which do not always fully correspond to the official teachings of Islam.
- 13 See for instance: <http://depo.ba/clanak/110304/ukleto-mjesto-na-magistralnom-putu-m-17-godisnje-ovdje-pogine-30-ak-ljudi-u-blizu-hiljadu-saobracajnih-nesreca>; [https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=744744612218104&id=408561169169785](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=744744612218104&id=408561169169785).
- 14 It is interesting that a rather well-known type of etiological legend about rival bridegrooms' processions who kill each other on their way to propose to a girl, in Bosnia usually explaining the origin of a medieval necropolis or smaller Muslim graves from various periods under the Ottoman empire (cf. Palavestra 2004: 162–164), is taken as an instance of the tragedies that had taken place here in the past.
- 15 There are five daily prayers conducted by practising Muslims.
- 16 A person who is able to recite a complete Qur'an by heart.
- 17 In fact, only one of my many interlocutors referred to Islam as the source of the prohibition against disturbing graves.



- 18 Contrary to other dead, it is believed that shehids do not need to wait until the Day of Judgement for the decision that will determine their fate in the afterlife, but are immediately granted direct access to *dženet*, i.e. Paradise. Moreover, they are believed to be alive in their graves (Qur'an 3: 169; cf. Schimmel 2001: 326; Nasr 2002: 344–346; Rosen 2002: 76; Brown 2004: 432).
- 19 Cf. Thompson motif F 511.0.4. Man carries his head under his arm. Bosnian scholars, however, argue that the Western motif of Christian saints carrying their severed heads, although similar, cannot be linked with the Bosnian motif of shehids carrying their heads. They maintain that the motif has probably been appropriated from other Eastern peoples with whom the Ottomans were in contact (Arabs, Persians etc.), and that Sufis or dervishes as agents of Islamic mysticism (*tesawwuf*) played the main role in their transmission (Filipović 1955: 97–105; Bringa 1995: 176–177; Softić 2002: 115–116, 363; Palavestra 2004: 492–494).
- 20 Neither shehids' tombstones nor mausoleums (*turbeta*) can be found on the list of shehidic monuments in Zli Brijeg or Janjići in the book by Mujezinović (1998), which gives an overview of shehid tombstones and mausoleums in central Bosnia. Tombstones of shehids are only mentioned in relation to Vogošća (cf. Mujezinović 1998: 20; Palavestra 2004: 491). According to Bosniak folklorist Aiša Softić, only legends of the local community truly testify which graves are traditionally considered shehids' graves (personal communication, July 2019).
- 21 Shehids sometimes overlap with "*Dobri*" (lit. the "Good ones"), i.e. *evlija*-s (from the Arabic *waliyya*), a sort of Muslim "saints" (cf. Bejtić 1982 [1981]: 111).
- 22 Especially in Sufi-influenced central Bosnia, the cult of shehids, centred around the graves of fallen Muslim warriors from the Ottoman Empire who invaded the territory of present-day Bosnia and Herzegovina from the end of the 14th to the end of the 16th century, played a significant role in the vernacular religious practices of the Muslim population. To ensure the fertility of the fields, women used to engage in collective annual prayers (*dova*) for the dead (*tevhid*) and for rain near some of the shehids' or good men's mausoleums (*turbe*, pl. *turbeta*), or tombstones (*nišan*, pl. *nišani*) in spring (Bringa 1995: 171–177; Softić 2002: 120). Individual practices, such as prayers for health or to ensure a happy outcome to a personal problem at the graves of shehids and other Good men (*evlijas*), sometimes a sort of sooth-saying practices (Palavestra 2004: 484–497), have also been common (cf. Rosen 2002: 76).
- 23 Members of a Yugoslav Royalist and Serbian nationalist guerrilla movement in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia.

## LIST OF INTERVIEWS / INTERLOCUTORS

### Interview 13

I1: male, b. 1949, Bosniak.

I2: female, b. 1951, Bosniak.

I3: female, b. 1982, Bosniak.

### Interview 19

I3: female, Bosniak.

### Interview 20

I: female, b. 1953, Bosniak.

### Interview 22

I1: male, b. 1946, Roma Muslim.

I3: male, b. 1993, Roma Muslim.

### Interview 32

I1: female, b. 1946, Bosniak.

I3: female, b. 1952, Bosniak.

### Interview 33

I: male, b. 1938, Bosniak.

### Interview 37

I1: male, b. 1969, Bosniak.

I2: female, b. 1972, Bosniak.

### Interview 128

I1: male, b. 1956, Bosniak.

I2: male, b. 1986, Bosniak.

### Interview MM035a

interlocutor 043: female, b. 1977, Bosniak.

### Interview MM051

Interlocutor 064 (Džemal): male, b. 1970, Bosniak, automechanic.

### Interview MM049

interlocutor 060 (Razija): female, b. around 1960, Bosniak.

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# An Overlooked Storytelling Tradition: Teyo Pehlivan and the Turkish Tall Tale

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**Abstract:** This study explores the often un(der)-recognized presence of tall tales in Turkish folklore, highlighting the narratives and storytelling techniques of Teyo Pehlivan and Cumhuriyet Seval from Erzurum as key illustrations of this presence. Despite their universal appeal, tall tales have yet to be acknowledged as a distinct genre within Turkish folklore. Likely due to their unique blend of truth and fiction, these tales are often classified into broader categories such as fairy tales, folktales, anecdotes, or jokes. This study examines the limitations in previous folklore research and the terminology issues that may have led to these misclassifications. It proposes the term ‘üfürme hikâye’ (blown tale) to capture the playful essence of tall tales and distinguish them as a unique genre.

Teyo Pehlivan’s deadpan delivery of tall tales in teahouses and Cumhuriyet Seval’s animated performances of these stories on stage and screen highlight the evolving nature of storytelling traditions. However, Teyo’s tales, fragmented and reduced to mere jokes in written records, highlight the difficulty of capturing the essence of tall tales in written form and the challenges in categorizing them. This underscores the vital role of performance in preserving and conveying the dynamic, multifaceted nature of this folklore.

The study highlights the significant contributions of Teyo Pehlivan and Cumhuriyet Seval in preserving the cultural heritage, values and dialect of Erzurum through their tall tales, fostering a sense of

belonging among their audiences. Seval carries on Teyo's legacy by embodying his character and playing a crucial role in preserving the tall tale tradition. This research aims to stimulate interest in Turkish tall tales and advocates for their recognition as a vibrant and essential aspect of Turkish folklore.

**Keywords:** cultural heritage, Erzurum, Fıkra, oral tradition, storytelling, tall tales, Teyo Emmi, Teyo Pehlivan, Turkish folklore, Üfürme Hikâye

## INTRODUCTION: TALL TALES AND THEIR CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

Storytelling has always been a crucial part of human culture, serving various purposes such as sharing experiences, transmitting knowledge and offering entertainment. One particularly entertaining form is the tall tale. A tall tale, broadly defined, is an entertaining account that typically starts with everyday events but quickly stretches credibility through exaggerations and outlandish claims until it implodes due to its overwhelming absurdity (Brown 1987: 20; Caron 1986: 29; Hegerfeldt 2005: 109). The storyteller, often the larger-than-life protagonist, presents these events as true, and the audience knowingly plays along (Brown 1987: 11, 32; Wonham 1989: 295), enjoying the performance.

While tall tales are commonly associated with American folklore, particularly during the period of westward expansion (Boatright 1949: 357; Wonham 1989: 284), their origins and influence extend across Europe and beyond. For instance, the adventures of Baron von Münchhausen, a global icon of tall tales, were already well-known in America by 1835, with 24 publications of his tales (Spiller et al. 1963: 728). In fact, the tradition of tall tales is not a modern invention but rather a narrative form with deep historical roots, reaching back to ancient times and across various cultures around the world (Brown 1987: 11).

Tall tales, while flourishing globally with particular prominence in American folklore, remain relatively unexplored in Türkiye. The lack of a clear and established definition, coupled with the absence of a Turkish equivalent that fully captures the essence of tall tales, has hampered research in this area. This study, therefore, seeks to fill this gap by examining the storytelling styles and selected tales of Erzurum-based storytellers Teyo Pehlivan<sup>1</sup> and Cumhur Seval. In doing so, it highlights the significant but neglected presence of tall tales within Turkish storytelling traditions. Furthermore, the study proposes a distinct Turkish term for the genre to address this cultural gap. The findings of this research will shed light on previously unexplored aspects of tall tales within Turkish folklore and pave the way for new areas of exploration.

## UNDERSTANDING TALL TALES IN TURKISH FOLKLORE: CHALLENGES AND MISCONCEPTIONS

Tall tales have flourished in North America with cultural significance, inspiring enthusiasm for their exploration (Brown 1987: 12; Henningsen 1966: 69; Thomas 1977: 1, 5). However, scholarly attention to tall tales varies globally (McMullen 2015: 19). In America, they were recognized early as a distinct genre (Ibid.: 24), whereas Europe categorized them much later (Thomas 1977: 4). In contrast, in Türkiye, Pertev Naili Boratav (1907–1998), a pioneer of Turkish folklore research, highlighted such stories in the Turkish narrative tradition in the late 1960s (1969: 101–102).

Early folklore studies, both globally and in Türkiye, often focused narrowly on form and content, frequently overlooking tall tales. This approach emphasized the exaggerated nature of these tales, leading to their dismissal as mere ‘lies’ (Hansen 2008: 445). While classification systems, like Aarne and Thompson’s indexes, have been valuable for cross-cultural folktale studies, their categories, such as ‘Tales of Lying’ and ‘Humor of Lies and Exaggeration’, may have unintentionally reinforced this misconception (Thomas 1977: 5).

In Türkiye, Boratav contributed to this misunderstanding by using the Aarne-Thompson (AT) index to categorize various Turkish folktales, such as hunting tales, homeland boastings, and Münchhausen-like exploits, under the label ‘Tales of Lying’. He defined the term “yalanlamalı masal” (Boratav 1969: 101–102), where ‘yalan’ means ‘lying’ and ‘masal’ means ‘fairy tale’ in Turkish. This term was likely influenced by the German ‘Lügenmärchen’ (lying fairy tale) and further emphasized the fantastic elements of the tales through the concept of lying<sup>2</sup>.

Boratav, however, did not clarify the term ‘yalanlamalı masal’ nor his use of the concept of ‘yalanlama’ (Kökus 2018: 4). He used both terms interchangeably with ‘tekerleme’ and also to refer to a humorous, first-person narrative style that consists of a series of unbelievable stories (Boratav 2009: 58; Kökus 2018: 61). Boratav further complicated the issue by suggesting that both yalanlama and tekerleme originated from fairy tales but had structurally diverged over time.

Although his examples of yalanlamalı masal align with tall tales, his inconsistent terminology led to varying classifications in academic studies. Some scholars classify these narratives as tekerleme, others as yalanlama, and still others as fairy tales (Kumartaşlıoğlu 2021: 307). Despite the value of Boratav’s work in Turkish folklore, his terminology has caused confusion, often linking his examples of ‘yalanlamalı masal’ with lying in Türkiye.

Exaggeration and outlandish claims are hallmarks of tall tales, intended to entertain by embracing the extraordinary and unbelievable (Kumartaşlıoğlu 2021: 308). Tall tales, as a performance-based genre (Thomas 1977: 7), rely on the storyteller’s skill and the audience’s engagement. They function as a form

of ‘play’ (Brown 1987: 32), a ‘conspiracy of make-believe’ where the storyteller feigns truthfulness and the audience pretends to believe. Therefore, dismissing tall tales as mere lies overlooks their inherent creativity and artistry (ibid.: 38) as well as their social relevance and historical context (Thomas 1996: 1452), which offer a unique window into their cultural universe. To fully appreciate tall tales, one must consider them in their original oral form and context.

Studying Turkish folktales is a complex task, fraught with challenges primarily due to research methods, most notably the reliance on transcribed texts (Bars 2017: 44). This method can result in inaccuracies and misclassifications, often losing the subtleties of tall tales during transcription. Tall tales are “told as truth but heard as fiction” (Wonham 1989: 288, 295), relying on an implicit agreement between the teller and the audience, or at least a part of it. This crucial element affects the story’s effectiveness and is difficult to convey in print, often leading to a loss of its contextual and functional essence (Stewart 2007: 98; Wonham 1993: 25–28).

The distinction between tall tales and other genres is often obscured by the incongruity between a tall tale’s apparent form and its actual content. Tall tales, as previously noted, are ‘told as truth but heard as fiction’, embodying a dual nature that fundamentally relies on the audience’s perception. Therefore, this ambiguity complicates their identification and raises the possibility of misinterpreting stories originally told as tall tales, leading to their classification into different categories. For instance, anecdotes exemplify this issue, as tall tales often masquerade as anecdotes due to their presentation as personal narratives (Brown 1987: 10; McMullen 2015: 98). This misclassification arises from the surface appearance of these tales, which align with anecdotal storytelling, while their essence, marked by exaggerated fictionality, remains disguised. Consequently, the inherent duality of tall tales, appearing as plausible anecdotes but fundamentally being fictional, poses a significant challenge in preserving their unique genre identity.

Türkiye is known for its abundance of anecdotes, often referred to as ‘fıkra’, which outnumber other storytelling forms (Walker 1993: 35). Although ‘fıkra’ and ‘anecdote’ are often used interchangeably in Turkish discourse, ‘fıkra’ primarily denotes jokes (Andrzejewski 2013: 20; Kara 2002: 60; Walker 1993: 40). This creates a conflation between anecdotes, fıkra and jokes within Turkish folklore. As a result, many tall tales may have been misidentified as jokes. For example, all the tales about Teyo are labelled as fıkra, even in the only two available academic studies<sup>3</sup>. This suggests that these stories have been misunderstood and inaccurately classified as mere jokes, underscoring the need for a more precise term.

Tall tales are exaggerated narratives with larger-than-life elements, designed to entertain by stretching believability. In contrast, anecdotes are shorter narratives rooted in personal experience and intended to illustrate a particular point. Likewise, jokes are brief forms of humour that rely on witty

punchlines or wordplay to provoke laughter (McMullen 2015: 75; Wonham 1993: 52). Current folklore classifications fail to adequately capture the playful and performative essence of these larger-than-life stories. Existing frameworks tend to conflate tall tales with other narrative traditions and forms discussed in this paper, leading to potential misinterpretations. To address this gap and better reflect the unique characteristics of this storytelling tradition, a more precise term is needed in the Turkish context.

### DEFINING THE TURKISH TALL TALE: INTRODUCING ‘ÜFÜRME HİKÂYE’

In a brief yet thought-provoking article, Güneş Sezen (2013: 1281) emphasizes the importance of context and function in defining and categorizing folklore. Although Sezen’s article does not specifically address tall tales, it offers valuable suggestions on how such stories might be classified. In this context, she argues that narratives with shared historical backgrounds, such as hunting and soldier stories, evolve in their social roles and purposes (Ibid.: 1284). Some narratives aim to recount real events (factual) and serve social or personal functions, while others evolve into humorous tales that incorporate exaggeration and fantastical elements (fictional) for the sake of entertainment.

Sezen (2013: 1285) proposes classifying factual accounts that highlight bravery or reminiscence as “kahramanlık anlatı” (heroic narrative) and stories that focus on entertainment through exaggeration as “palavra edebiyatı” (palaver literature). While this term seems initially applicable to tall tales and is sometimes used to refer to Teyo’s tales analyzed in this study, the word ‘palavra’ carries negative connotations in Turkish, suggesting lying, belittling, or humiliation. Therefore, it is not a suitable term for tales whose primary intent is not to deceive but to entertain through humorous exaggeration. Recognizing this distinction is essential, as it underscores that tall tales, though primarily designed to amuse, also fulfil important social and personal functions.

As a result, this research proposes using the term ‘üfürme hikâye’ (blown tale) to represent the Turkish equivalent of the tall tale. This term captures the essence of tall tales by emphasizing their humorous nature and the exaggeration inherent in their storytelling. The word ‘üfürme’ (blowing up) highlights the humour of exaggeration, signalling that the story is meant to be lighthearted and not taken too seriously. By combining the metaphorical sense of ‘blowing something up’ with the concept of a tale, ‘üfürme hikâye’ effectively conveys the idea of exaggerated storytelling. This aligns with the performative nature of tall tales, where the storyteller’s skill in exaggeration is key to entertainment. Moreover, ‘üfürme hikâye’ underscores the interactive nature of storytelling, showing how storytellers adapt their tales based on audience reactions, making the experience engaging and dynamic. This interaction is crucial, as it highlights how the story grows and expands as it unfolds, enhancing the experience for both the storyteller and the audience.

In summary, ‘üfürme hikâye’ encapsulates the core of the humorous and exaggerated storytelling tradition in Turkish folklore, emphasizing creative embellishment, interactive performance and the dynamic relationship between the storyteller and the audience.

## **TALL TALES IN TURKISH FOLKLORE: THE ERZURUM TRADITION AND ITS KEY FIGURES**

Tall tales are often local stories, shaped by the unique challenges and special characteristics of the places where people live. In particular, areas with extreme weather, tough landscapes and limited resources tend to inspire these stories, where people often exaggerate their struggles with survival and isolation to make their experiences more relatable to others (Blair 1987: 1; Wonham 1993: 24). One such place is Erzurum, Teyo’s hometown. While tall tales have not yet been officially recognized as a separate genre in Turkish folklore, Türkiye has a rich and vibrant storytelling tradition that includes humorously exaggerated tales that might fit under this category. Erzurum, located in Türkiye’s East Anatolian region at 1,950 meters, is known as the coldest city in the country, famous for its harsh winters, heavy snowfall and freezing temperatures. Locals often call it ‘Türkiye’s Siberia’, a nickname that plays on the exaggerations common in tall tales. In fact, certain areas can still be cut off by snowstorms, inspiring stories that reflect the creativity and resilience of those who call it home. One such tale is shared by the renowned traveller Evliya Çelebi<sup>4</sup>, echoing the common tall tale motif (ATU 1889F) of the frozen voices that thaw in spring. He tells of a traveller who dubbed Erzurum “Erezolúm” (cruel to man) after experiencing 11 months and 29 days without summer. He also recounts a cat that, while jumping from roof to roof, froze in mid-air and thawed with a “Miaú!” when spring arrived, falling to the ground (Çelebi 1834: 114).

In addition to its harsh natural conditions, Erzurum, as a strategic border city, has also witnessed a turbulent history shaped by wars, occupations, famines and epidemics (Küçükuğurlu 2023: 553). Despite the hardships of the past, the city has maintained a resilient sense of community. Social gatherings are a part of daily life and help maintain community ties and cultural practices (Naldan 2020: 257). However, these gatherings occur within a framework of strict gender separation, with men and women socializing in separate spaces. This is particularly the case in places like the ‘kahvehane’ and ‘çayevi’, which are entirely male-dominated spaces (Bozkurt 2019: 3; Çağlayan 2013: 106). In these spaces, evenings often find men gathered around warm hearths, sipping tea, chatting, sharing stories, and occasionally enjoying folk songs accompanied by traditional instruments like the ‘saz’ or ‘bağlama’, thereby preserving the cultural heritage that defines the city (Ünalán 2021: 226–230).



## The Legacy of Teyo Pehlivan and Cumhuriyet Seval: Evolution of Erzurum's Tall Tales

One of the bearers of this cultural heritage is Şeyh İde, also known as Teyo Pehlivan. Born in 1913, he spent his entire life in Erzurum (Ertekin 2022), captivating audiences with his fantastic tales in local coffee and teahouses. Living in a small municipal cottage, he relied on charity from the local soup kitchen for survival (Teyo Pehlivan Kimdir? [Who is Teyo Pehlivan?] 2013). Initially dismissed as a liar and madman, his storytelling eventually gained recognition late in life when a journalist (Narmanlıoğlu 1998) wrote about him.

Despite his lack of formal education and illiteracy, Teyo had a vast knowledge of the world, particularly in current events and local history, which he gleaned entirely from the radio, television, and conversations around him (Teyo Pehlivan'ı Yakından Tanıyalım [Let's Get to Know Teyo Pehlivan Closely], 2013). His tales featured diverse characters, from historical figures like Mustafa Kemal Atatürk to celebrities and cultural icons such as Marilyn Monroe and Muhammad Ali. His tales were a refuge from everyday worries, providing solace and levity to his audience, who eagerly gathered in the teahouses to hear him tell his tales.

Teyo's tales, commonly found in newspaper clippings and Erzurum humour books, are all labelled as *fıkra* (jokes). However, this label simplifies his storytelling, which was more intricate and performance-based. Some years ago, an Erzurum encyclopaedia project was initiated to preserve Teyo's legacy (Narmanlıoğlu 2003: 203), but it remains pending a quarter of a century later, becoming a tall tale in its own right.

Cumhuriyet Seval, born on 29 October 1955 in Erzurum, has been a prominent theatre artist who has played a crucial role in preserving and expanding Teyo Pehlivan's legacy. A beloved figure in Erzurum's cultural scene<sup>5</sup>, he has devoted himself to promoting his hometown both locally and internationally. Like Teyo Pehlivan, he has never moved away from Erzurum and remains closely connected to his roots. By assuming Teyo's character, Seval enriched it with new stories inspired by Teyo's style. Nevertheless, he truly immortalized Teyo and gained national recognition for both himself and Teyo by sharing tales he had previously reserved for special occasions on television, recreating the teahouse atmosphere where Teyo originally spun his tales.

In masculine spaces like teahouses, tall tales, with their boastful exaggerations, are a celebrated form of expression (Henningsen 1965: 214; Ryan 2023: 209). These tales, which tie in with traditional masculinity (Edwards 2009: 10), not only add a light-hearted element to storytelling but also foster a competitive spirit. Teyo championed this tradition, and despite being a lifelong bachelor, he frequently boasted of his romantic encounters with famous women, spoke of his intimate experiences, or exaggerated his physical attributes (Duman 2000: 279–280, 281–282, 300, 305–306; Narmanlıoğlu 2003: 202, 209–210). As a result, his stories, while adding a light-hearted element and

fostering a competitive spirit, often included language and themes that could be considered quite lewd.

Seval, on the other hand, aware that his audience now includes families and children, avoids vulgar and overly masculine language, excluding Teyo's lewd stories. As a result, this makes his performances accessible and enjoyable for all. This shift may explain why Şeyh İde is known as Teyo Pehlivan (Teyo the Champion Wrestler), while Cumhur Seval is called Teyo Emmi (Uncle Teyo). Seval's portrayals have turned Teyo the Champion Wrestler into a more family-friendly 'uncle' figure.

### Erzurum's Cultural Ethos and the Dadaş Spirit in Tall Tales

The dominance of male storytellers<sup>6</sup>, audiences, and protagonists in traditional tall tales, especially those from American folklore (like the stories of Paul Bunyan and Pecos Bill), reflects the gender norms of their time. These tales often center on male characters involved in activities traditionally associated with men, such as hunting, fishing, warfare and boxing. As time progressed, however, the tall tale genre has evolved to include a broader range of voices and subjects, with an increasing inclusion of female protagonists as well (Hanson 2011: 140). This evolution mirrors changing societal dynamics, as the genre has moved beyond its masculine roots to embrace more diverse characters, themes, and storytelling formats.

The tall tales from Erzurum share many similarities with traditional American frontier tall tales, both featuring exaggerated feats of strength and resilience, while reflecting the values and cultural pride of their communities. However, one notable difference is the much stricter role of women in Erzurum's stories. Unlike frontier tales, where women may sometimes be participants or even storytellers (Brown 1987: 13–14; Piacentino 2001: 60–61), in Erzurum, tall tales are almost exclusively the domain of men. Teyo Pehlivan's influence in establishing the tall tale tradition in local, male-dominated tea-houses likely shaped the Erzurum tall tale tradition, which excludes women from both participation and recognition. However, it is important to note that the main goal of this study is to highlight the presence of tall tales in Turkish folklore, with examples from Erzurum. Therefore, the exclusion of women in the Erzurum tradition may not necessarily reflect a broader Turkish tradition, which is believed to exist. In fact, future research in other regions of Türkiye could uncover variations in tall tale practices, some of which might also feature women in more active roles. This would help to highlight the important role of local factors in shaping the tradition by revealing how tall tales adapt to different cultural and social contexts.

The roots of this male-dominated tradition can also be traced to Erzurum's broader social and historical context. Erzurum, like many other places in Anatolia, has long been shaped by patriarchal traditions, with men traditionally occupying public roles while women were often confined to domestic

spaces (Çalıkoglu 2018: 2). Although these customs have softened over time, the one-time tradition of large families living together under one roof likely played a significant role in strengthening gender roles and fostering a more conservative mindset.<sup>7</sup> Erzurum's challenging history, marked by occupations, wars and harsh living conditions, helped shape these deeply rooted social structures. Despite the growing acceptance of modern, progressive ideas in Erzurum today, traces of old traditions are still evident in certain aspects of daily life, such as some traditional gender roles and segregated social spaces, with teahouses remaining a prime example of male-dominated spaces.

Erzurum's key role in the Turkish War of Independence<sup>8</sup> further moulded its masculine identity and shaped its distinctive character. The men of Erzurum are called 'Dadaş', a title that represents resilience, bravery, honour and reliability (Aliyeva 2018: 9). As a symbol of masculinity, this title has come to define Erzurum, earning it the nickname 'Land of Dadaş'. As a result, the values of patriotism and heroism have become central to the region's identity, instilling a deep sense of pride in its people.

The traditional role of the tall tale to exaggerate heroic exploits provides an ideal framework for Teyo and Seval to embody the Dadaş spirit, aligning with Erzurum's cultural ethos and values. Drawing from the "deep cultural matrix" (Brown 1987: 31) that unites the people of Erzurum, both storytellers use the local dialect to highlight the region's values, social norms and shared concerns. As such, their tales serve not only as entertainment but also as a reflection of regional pride and tradition. Through their stories, they foster a bond with and among those who hold these tales dear as part of their heritage.

Teyo's tales of bravery and patriotism are a perfect reflection of the Dadaş spirit, which only adds to his legendary status in Erzurum. For example, he claims to be the originator of 'cirit', a traditional equestrian javelin-throwing sport, and boasts of throwing a javelin that circled the globe before returning to Erzurum (Çarbaş 2011: 402). Pehlivan's self-portrayal goes beyond merely exaggerating his athletic prowess. Indeed, his stories depict him as a man of unmatched strength and martial skill.

However, in his tales, Teyo upholds a code of honour, even in times of war, claiming that he withdrew from the Korean War to maintain balance after a soldier pleaded with him not to intervene (Narmanlıoğlu 2003: 205–206). Furthermore, he proudly recounts defeating the legendary Muhammad Ali, which led to the boxer's conversion to Islam (Ibid.: 206–207). Teyo's legendary patriotism includes a tale where he downed an Armenian aircraft with a single stone during the 1918 occupation of Erzurum, demonstrating unparalleled bravery in protecting his people (Ibid.: 205)<sup>9</sup>. His exploits extend to romantic adventures as well, including a story where he saved a woman, later revealed to be Marilyn Monroe, from three terrifying men (Duman 2000: 297). His exceptional shooting and hunting abilities, such as killing a whole flock of cranes with a single shot (Teyyo Pehlivan Hikayeleri! [Teyyo Pehlivan Tales!] 2010), align with the

tall tale tradition of exaggerated feats of strength and skill. In one tale, due to his marksmanship reputation, he boasts of being invited on a unique hunting trip where he defends his country's pride and honour.

*Shah Reza Pahlavi invited President İsmet İnönü and me to Iran. We went, and the world's leaders were there. They took us to a hunting party. Whoever pointed the rifle shot the prey. Then it was my turn. İnönü bowed and said, 'Teyo, I beg you, please don't let us down'. After praying to God, I picked up the rifle and shot at the ducks flying in the air. Two ducks fell to the ground immediately. However, I heard a buzzing sound and realized that the bullet I had fired was still circling, seeking more prey. After three or five more had been shot, one of the ducks hid behind the rocks. The bullet found it and killed it there. As soon as we returned to Türkiye, İnönü said, 'Teyo, without you, we would have been ruined and kissed me on the eyes.'<sup>10</sup> (Narmanlıoğlu 2003: 204–205).*

With the exception of one instance, Teyo consistently takes on the central role in the tales told by him and Seval. This characteristic feature of tall tales, typically told in the first person, lends the storyteller's exaggerated accounts an air of immediacy and authenticity (Siporin 2000: 89), making them feel like real anecdotes. When the narrator himself is not the protagonist, he may share a story about a close friend or relative (Brown 1987: 17). An example of this exception occurs in a tale where Teyo is not the main hero. Instead, the story recounts his grandfather bringing tea, the favourite drink of the people of Erzurum, to Türkiye (Fıkralarla Türkiye 2018).

Regardless of the vantage point, tall tales are always told anecdotally as a reminiscence (Brown 1987: 17; McEntire 2014: 747), enhancing their authenticity by anchoring them in the familiar and personal. However, it is important to note that this effort to establish a sense of reality is not intended to mislead the audience. The storyteller creates this reality only to collapse it later (Hegerfeldt 2005: 109), akin to a sequence of dominoes, where carefully arranged pieces are eventually toppled down for amusement. The essence of the tall tale lies in its ability to weave the ordinary and the extraordinary together. The storyteller establishes a credible foundation for fantastical exploits to unfold by grounding the story in familiar settings and characters while incorporating details from the narrator and audience's daily experiences (Brown 1987: 17; Caron 1986: 28). This juxtaposition, the unexpected fusion of realism and the extraordinary, fosters humour and makes the tall tale so captivating.

Additionally, the comedic effect of the tall tale may stem from the disparity between the narrator's delivery and the content being conveyed. This incongruity, exemplified by Teyo Pehlivan's delivery of even his most fantastical

tales in a serious and deadpan manner, evokes an air of absurdity that captivates the audience.

## **PRESERVING AND INNOVATING TEYO'S LEGACY: TECHNIQUES AND CHARACTERISTICS**

While very few of Teyo Pehlivan's tales have been transcribed, and those that have are often simplified into mere jokes, our understanding of his storytelling remains limited and fragmented, relying on scattered mentions from audiences who experienced his performances. In light of this, Cumhur Seval has emerged as a pivotal figure in preserving Teyo's legacy and nurturing the tradition of tall tale telling. For more than two decades, Seval has embodied Teyo in his performances, becoming so immersed in the character that many now regard him as the authentic Teyo Pehlivan<sup>11</sup>. Through his own 'Teyo Tales' and skilful adaptations of Teyo's stories, Seval has not only revitalized the character for new generations but also demonstrates the richness of the overlooked Turkish tall tale tradition.

Both Teyo and Seval tell the story of rescuing a jeep that has fallen into the 'Sarıkamış Sea'. This story provides an ideal platform to explore not only their distinct narrative styles, but also some diverse narrative strategies and techniques employed in tall tale telling. In the transcribed version (Duman 2000: 295–296) of Teyo's original story, the governor of a neighbouring province calls on Teyo as their last hope. Teyo rides to the rescue and dives into the water to retrieve the jeep. Having found it at the bottom of the sea, he takes the vehicle under his arm and, commenting on its weight, begins to surface. When he gets ashore, he realizes that he has not only pulled out the jeep but also a ferry somehow attached to it. This story illustrates the risks of evaluating a tall tale solely based on its transcribed form. When removed from its original performance context, the narrative loses the essence of its genre, often reduced to a mere joke hinging on a punch line or surprising twist, such as the ferry emerging with the jeep. This loss of context highlights how the tall tale tradition itself can be overlooked and overshadowed by a focus on written classifications. In contrast, tall tales, unlike jokes with punchlines (Wonham 1993: 52), distribute humour throughout the narrative by building on increasingly absurd exaggerations.

Seval's reimagining (Fıkralarla Türkiye 2020) of Teyo's tale stays true to its core while enriching it with humour, cultural details and unexpected embellishments. Moreover, the audience is drawn deeper into the narrative through questions, incredulous comments, expressive gestures and cleverly planted prompts. These interactive elements serve various purposes, such as motivating the storyteller, guiding the flow of the story and enhancing engagement. For instance, questions play a crucial role in Seval's storytelling, aiding in structuring the narrative and highlighting the interactive nature of the tales.



In this vein, Seval's retelling of Teyo's tale begins with an inquiry about Teyo's whereabouts, asking where he had been after a lengthy absence from the tea-house. Teyo was known for his brief disappearances (Çarbaş 2011: 403), which not only piqued the curiosity of his listeners and provided a convincing backdrop for his adventures but also presented an opportunity to coax Teyo into telling a story. Since no one could force Teyo to tell a story, he would only do so if he wanted to (Kim Demiş Palavracı Diye [Who Says He is a Show-Off?], 1998). Thus, the initial question about Teyo's whereabouts is strategically formulated to urge him to speak, serving as a typical opening for many of Seval's tales. Likewise, in some of these tales, it is Teyo himself who poses the opening question. A compelling opening question can spark curiosity and set the stage for the narrative. For example, the tale about Teyo's grandfather begins with Teyo asking the audience if they know who introduced tea to Türkiye. This serves as an excellent example of a compelling opening question, as it is culturally contextual; tea is a staple for the people of Erzurum.

Some other tales of Seval begin with highly provocative questions. Provocative comments or questions seem to fit well with tall tales, which typically feature exaggeration and boasting. The role of provocation enhances the competitive spirit of tall tales, leading to even more elaborate and exaggerated accounts. In the context of the tall tale as a predominantly masculine discourse, Teyo's skills associated with masculinity are often doubted or challenged. This dynamic exemplifies how tall tales serve as a means of asserting social and personal status within their cultural milieu. Questions regarding Teyo's competency in culturally emblematic activities, such as *cirit*<sup>12</sup>, and *skiing*<sup>13</sup>, become particularly provocative, as they challenge not only his skill set, but also his very identity as a *Dadaş*, given the centrality of these practices to Erzurum's cultural fabric. As tall tales entertain a group of insiders (Brown 1987: 101), Teyo handpicks topics of cultural significance for the Erzurum community. Moreover, by telling his tales in the local dialect, Teyo reinforces his insider identity and adds an authentic, local flavour to his stories, cementing his bond with the audience.

Sometimes, it is the tall tale teller who, through their storytelling techniques such as exaggerated gestures, dramatic pauses and accentuated exaggerations creates a space for the audience to interrupt and ask a question (Grobman 1975: 19; Henningsen 1965: 196–197; Thomas 1977: 6). A notable example of such a provoked interruption comes when Teyo pauses in the middle of his thrilling narrative about his life-and-death struggle with a bear to light a cigarette, and the audience immediately interjects to ask what happened next (Duman 2000: 276). By using these techniques, storytellers keep the audience's interest constant, creating an engaging and interactive experience.

This interactivity can involve a stranger, an overly eager or naive person, or any audience member who challenges the story by believing it to be factual or trying to expose a lie (Wonham 1993: 46). Sometimes, a friend of the tall



tale teller planted in the audience acts as an interlocutor, contributing through rhetorical questions and reactions. These elements play a significant role in deepening the audience's engagement, as seen in Seval's tales.

Whether the questions or interactions with the audience are real or rhetorical, an experienced storyteller like Seval always turns them into opportunities to deepen and enrich the narrative. For example, in the jeep story, right at the beginning, when the audience objects that there is no sea in Sarıkamış, Seval skilfully uses this objection as a springboard to escalate his tale to a whole new level of absurdity. Although there is no sea there, only a lake, Seval boldly claims that the sea supplied all the water needed by the hundreds of thousands of soldiers encamped in the region during the Great Mobilization<sup>14</sup>. He implies that the water level of the sea dropped significantly as a result, causing it to become a lake. Furthermore, by highlighting that the soldiers also used the water to brew tea, an indispensable part of the Erzurum lifestyle, Seval adds a cultural touch and humorously rationalizes the dwindling water for the tea-consuming people of Erzurum. Tall tales always provide a 'rational' explanation for their fantastical elements (Caron 1986: 29; Henningsen 1965: 214–215), albeit using their own distinct logic, as this example shows. To top it all off, Seval also verifies his claims with his trademark phrase, 'Bende yalan yok, hilaf da yok!' ('I don't lie, nor do I cheat!'<sup>15</sup>).

In tall tales, truth assertions can establish a sense of realism and then gradually undermine it, creating a contrast that amplifies the humour of the exaggerated elements. This dual function exemplifies the paradoxical nature of tall tales, which aim to "cover yet reveal their true nature" (Caron 1986: 28). Like the fairy tale, the tall tale also often begins with opening phrases that function like a 'code', signalling the genre to the audience. Fairy tales typically use phrases like 'once upon a time' to instantly draw listeners into a magical world, establishing their fictional nature. In contrast, tall tales, grounded in the real world (McMullen 2015: 13), often begin with claims of truth, presenting "fiction disguised as fact" (Brown 1987: 2). Through these realist and truth-asserting techniques, tall tales initially position themselves in a familiar setting and recognizable context (Brown 1987: 20; Wonham 1989: 289). However, as the story unfolds, this foundation is gradually undermined by exaggerations and increasingly absurd events, eventually stretching the narrative to the point where it collapses under its own "sheer absurdity" (Caron 1986: 28–29; Hegerfeldt 2005: 108–109). This progression from the apparently factual to the clearly fantastical is a defining characteristic of tall tales.

The jeep story has a classic tall tale narrative that moves from the realistic to the impossible and culminates in an absurd climax (Boatright 1949: 360). In this sense, the story takes place in a familiar setting near Erzurum, a region dotted with large and small lakes. To add to his tale's credibility, Teyo again asserts the veracity of his story right at the beginning with his characteristic phrase. The story then takes an unlikely but theoretically plausible turn when

Teyo claims that the ‘Sarıkamış Sea’ was once a real sea but has since shrunk due to dwindling water. As the story progresses, the exaggeration intensifies, crossing the boundaries of believability as Teyo recalls a seemingly endless, hours-long search for the jeep in the inky depths.

Nevertheless, when asked if he ever came up for air, he boldly responds that those who know him know he can hold his breath for a long time. This response both maintains his claim to authenticity and arrogantly embarrasses the questioner. Finally, he retrieves the jeep, paddling to the surface with it. Amidst the astonished crowd on shore, he then realizes that along with the jeep, he has also pulled out a previously sunken ferry boat, marking the story’s absurd climax.

Beyond the formulaic progression from familiar to fantastical, tall tales, like those of Teyo, often culminate in typical endings (Brown 1987: 20). For example, as with the jeep story, they can conclude with climactic moments that highlight humorous or outrageous elements, emphasizing the tale’s exaggeration and absurdity (McEntire 2014: 748). Tall tales might also end with unexpected and humorous resolutions (Brown 1987: 20), adding entertainment value through inventive twists and absurd scenarios. These conclusions sometimes provide a ridiculous solution to ‘prove’ the incredible events in the story (Wonham 1993: 35). In one such tale, Teyo returns home to discover his horse missing a leg after colliding with a vehicle. Undeterred, he retraces his steps, finds the missing leg, and reattaches it to the horse, showcasing the whimsical nature of this storytelling tradition (Duman 2000: 278–279)<sup>16</sup>. Sometimes, tall tales may also end with an absurd answer to an audience question (McEntire 2014: 748), highlighting the story’s impossible point and eliciting laughter and a sense of playful disbelief. For instance, when asked about his life-or-death struggle with a bear, Teyo ends with: “The bear ate me”<sup>17</sup> (Duman 2000: 276).

It is also common for storytellers to end their tales with a claim of truth, reinforcing their authenticity while acknowledging the fantastical nature of the story (Brown 1987: 20; McEntire 2014: 748; Wonham 1993: 35). This playful insistence on the story’s truthfulness is a defining feature of tall tales, adding to their charm and entertainment value. In keeping with this pattern, Seval’s tale of duck hunting (Komedi Dünyası 2006) on the Aras River during an icy winter in 1910 begins with Teyo’s signature catchphrase. He describes how the freezing temperature froze the ducks in the river, so he collected and put them in the saddlebags of his donkey. On his way home, the ducks thawed out and flew away with the donkey. Later, Teyo claims that he kept the story to himself because he thought no one would believe it, winking at the audience and inviting them in on the joke, adding another layer of absurdity to the story. As the tale progresses, he adds that he saw the news on television about a flying donkey. When questioned about the existence of television in those days, Teyo responds that there was no such thing at that time. Instead, he claims that his nephew cleverly made a television out of an old, broken radio. He finishes the

story as he began it, with his formulaic truth-asserting catchphrase: ‘I don’t lie, nor do I cheat!’<sup>18</sup>

No matter how absurd the conclusion, a tall tale is always about the “will-  
ingness to tell a lie and to be lied to, knowing that the end result will be shared  
amusement” (McEntire 2014: 748). It reflects the playful nature of storytelling  
and the understanding between the teller and the audience that the tall tale is  
meant to entertain, not deceive. Ultimately, tall tales, even when occasionally  
teasing outsiders or strangers, maintain a spirit of good-natured humour and  
amusement rather than hostility. This light-hearted tone emphasizes their  
optimistic essence, reflecting the belief that challenges can be overcome with  
creativity and foresight. In this way, both Ide and Seval, through their ‘Teyo  
tales’, embody this spirit, offering perfect examples of Turkish tall tales that  
align with all the characteristics discussed in this study.

## CONCLUSION: THE IMPACT AND FUTURE OF TURKISH TALL TALES

In conclusion, this study reveals the rich yet un(der)recognized tradition of  
tall tales in Turkish folklore, with a particular focus on Erzurum’s narrative  
masters, Teyo Pehlivan and Cumhur Seval. Historically, Turkish tall tales have  
been obscured by issues of terminology and classification, often misidenti-  
fied or overlooked due to a lack of precise terminology and an over-reliance  
on transcribed texts. To address this, the term ‘üfürme hikâye’ (blown tale) is  
proposed, positioning these tales as a distinct genre. This term not only cap-  
tures their playful and humorous essence but also emphasizes their interactive  
nature. It reflects the dynamic blend of exaggerated storytelling and audience  
engagement, which are essential features often lost in written forms.

Through a comparative analysis of established universal tall tale charac-  
teristics, this study confirms that Turkish tall tales align with this tradition.  
While an exhaustive look at the presence of tall tales in other regions, or at  
regional variations, is beyond the scope of this work, the tales of Teyo Pehlivan  
and Cumhur Seval serve as representative examples of the Turkish tall tale tra-  
dition, particularly from Erzurum.

Teyo and Seval embody Erzurum’s tall tale tradition through their unique  
storytelling styles. Teyo, with his composed and dignified manner, delivers his  
exaggerated humorous stories in a deadpan tone that resonates particularly  
with the local male audience in teahouses. In contrast, Seval adopts a more  
playful approach, using animated gestures and laughter to engage a broader  
audience while adapting his narratives for stage and screen.

Had Seval not taken on Teyo’s persona and shared these stories on new plat-  
forms, Teyo’s legacy might have remained confined to Erzurum and been lost  
to time. However, Seval’s dedication to reshaping and sharing both Teyo’s and  
his own tales allowed the Erzurum tall tale tradition to reach a wider audience,  
ensuring its survival.

Despite their different styles, both Teyo and Seval have made lasting contributions to Erzurum's cultural identity. Their stories go beyond entertainment, serving as important vehicles for preserving and transmitting the region's history, values and distinctive dialect. By embracing humour and exaggeration, they celebrate local traditions and foster a sense of belonging and pride among their audiences, connecting them to their cultural roots. In doing so, their tales create a bridge between generations, making the region's folklore accessible to contemporary audiences while also preserving its historical significance.

Ultimately, this study confirms the existence of Turkish tall tales in folklore by showcasing their presence through the tales of Seval and Pehlivan. By proposing 'üfürme hikâye' as the Turkish equivalent of tall tales, this research solidifies it as a distinct genre in Turkish folklore. This framework will facilitate the identification and exploration of other potentially overlooked tall tales and storytellers throughout Türkiye. Bringing these stories to light will deepen our understanding of this rich storytelling tradition and the cultural values embedded within it. Furthermore, this research aims to spark scholarly interest and foster appreciation for this vital aspect of Turkish folklore.

## NOTES

- 1 Hereafter referred to as 'Teyo'.
- 2 Boratav was well-versed in German folklore and collaborated with the renowned folklorist Professor Wolfram Eberhard to publish an index of Turkish folk tales (Typen Türkischer Volksmärchen, 1953).
- 3 See Bedir 2023; Kara 2002.
- 4 Michael D. Sheridan (2011) considers certain stories in Çelebi's travelogue to be 'tall tales', and his article examines a story about Erzurum and its harsh climate in this context.
- 5 Seval had already established himself for his embodiment of 'Ferezet Eze', a fictional female character from the region (Duman 2005: 273)
- 6 A scarcity of female tall tale tellers appears to be a cross-cultural phenomenon (McAndrews 1999: 66, 69; Wonham 1989: 306). Reinforcing this observation, research uncovered no documented female practitioners of this tradition in Türkiye.
- 7 See Sarioğlu 2013.
- 8 Erzurum hosted the Erzurum Congress, where crucial decisions for the nation's future were made. The city's strategic location and its people's unwavering spirit contributed significantly to the nation's liberation during the Turkish War of Independence.
- 9 This tale is also part of Seval's tall tale repertoire. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xbH3qHCVSVQ> (00:00-03:49).
- 10 Translation by the authors. The original passage reads: "Şah Rıza Pehlevi, İsmet İnönü ile beni İran'a devet etti. Gittik dünyanın sayılı liderleri orada. Bizi av partisine götürdüler. Silahını nişan alan avı vurur. Sıra bene geldi. İnönü eğildi kulağıma, Vola Teyyo ne olur yüzümüzü kara çıkarma dedi. Aldım silahı elime sığındım yaradana, havada uçan ördeklere ateş ettim. İki ördek anında yere düştü. Ancak bir vızıltıdır ki gopti. Kurşun ateş olmuş, dolanır, ördek arır. Üç-beş derken ördeklerden biri kayalıkların arkasına gizlendi. Kurşun onu da kayalıkların arkasında buldu ve öldürdü".
- 11 Even in academic research Ali Bedir (2023: 117) attributes Teyo Emmi's catchphrase 'I don't lie, nor do I cheat!' to Teyo Pehlivan, possibly confusing the two characters.
- 12 See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rf7WU8wsV3w> (00:00-03:01).

- 13 See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IxKvLSxG548&t=85s> (00:00-03:17).
- 14 The general mobilisation proclaimed by the Ottoman state at the time of WWI.
- 15 Translation by the authors.
- 16 Seval also incorporates this tale into his tall tale performances. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NioR16of5dk> (03:42-06:28).
- 17 Translation by the authors.
- 18 Translation by the authors.

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# Exploring the Elements of Spirituality in the Folklore of Odisha: A Select Study

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**Abstract:** Odisha is a state in eastern India known for its rich cultural heritage. It is a repository of invaluable folklore traditions, including stories, myths, riddles, proverbs, arts, crafts, sculptures, dance, music and other cultural expressions. These rituals and traditions offer deep insights into the Odia people's heritage, customs, ceremonies, indigeneity and ways of life. While these folklore elements are often regarded as forms of entertainment, they hold profound cultural and spiritual significance. This research explores selected folklore elements of Odisha, including traditions and rituals associated with Jagannath culture (such as *Rath Yatra*, *Snana Yatra*, *Chandan Yatra*, and *Nabakalebara*); seasonal and agrarian festivals like *Raja Parba*, *Nuakhai*, *Kartik Purnima*, *Jhamu Yatra*, *Chaitra Amavasya*, and *Bakula Amavasya*; folk performances such as *Pala*, *Danda Nata*, *Ravana Chhaya*, and *Ramlila*; visual arts like *Pattachitra* and *Jhoti Chitra*; and folk narratives like the story of Mangala and the tale of Hanuman and the Sanjeevani Hill. The study examines how these folklore elements are interwoven with spirituality and how experiencing them helps people feel connected to the divine. It further motivates the people of Odisha to preserve and celebrate their cultural traditions. The study contributes to the fields of folklore studies, cultural anthropology and heritage preservation.

**Keywords:** Odisha, folklore, rituals and traditions, performances, art, spirituality, cultural identity, folklore studies, heritage preservation

## INTRODUCTION

Odisha is a state in eastern India known for its rich cultural heritage. The state is the repository of invaluable folklore collections, such as stories, myths, riddles, proverbs, arts, crafts, sculptures, dance, music and other cultural expressions passed down through generations. This cultural repository provides information regarding the Odia people's culture, legacy, rituals, traditions, ceremonies, customs, indigeneity, conduct, etc. While primarily recognized for its entertainment value, folklore also serves other essential societal functions, such as its spiritual dimension. The spiritual essence of Odisha constitutes a significant aspect of its cultural identity, and it exerts a profound influence on the lives of its inhabitants. Many temples and sacred places are located throughout the state, including the well-known Jagannath temple in Puri. The stories, myths, customs, traditions, rituals, beliefs, etc., associated with the Lord Jagannath and his temple provide a profound sense of connection with the divine that helps devotees to cultivate love, kindness and compassion, which are integral to the concept of spirituality. In the worship of Lord Jagannath, different rituals such as *Rath Yatra*<sup>1</sup>, *Chandan Yatra*<sup>2</sup>, and *Nabakalevara*<sup>3</sup> are observed and performed, which help devotees attain salvation by connecting with the spiritual light. In addition, the people of Odisha celebrate many other religious rituals, festivals and traditions deeply associated with the concept of spirituality. Some religious ways and practices considered to be means of attaining spirituality are *Jhamu Yatra*, *Chitalagi Amavasya*, *Chaitra Amavasya*, *Bakula Amavasya*, *Raja Parba*,<sup>4</sup> etc. Odisha's folk music and dance, such as *Pala and Danda Nata*, which are fundamental to its cultural identity, also exude spirituality. The moral teachings embedded within many folk tales, including the story of Mangala, Hanuman and Sanjeevani Hill highlight virtues such as compassion, generosity and dedication, which are intrinsically linked to the essence of spirituality.

This paper aims to delve into and illuminate the spiritual significance inherent in a myriad of folk traditions and rituals prevalent in Odisha. These include the rituals associated with the Jagannath cult and other customary practices, traditional dances, melodic songs and captivating folk tales. We aim to showcase the rich cultural heritage of Odisha and how these folklore traditions contribute to the spiritual growth and attainment of the people in their divine journey. Through our efforts, we aim to inspire and motivate the people of Odisha, especially the younger generation, to practice, promote and preserve their cultural traditions actively.

## METHODOLOGY

The folklore collections of Odisha are extensive and diverse. Approximately 70 percent of Odisha's population comprises tribal communities, whose

indigenous folklore differs significantly from that of non-tribal groups. The folk traditions and practices of the eastern coastal region are predominantly influenced by Hindu mythologies, while those of western Odisha are deeply rooted in tribal culture. Additionally, many of Odisha's folklore elements bear cultural influences from neighboring states such as Jharkhand, West Bengal, Chhattisgarh, and Andhra Pradesh. Given Odisha's cultural breadth and complexity, it is not feasible to discuss all folklore elements within a single paper. Therefore, this study focuses on selected folklore elements, including traditions and rituals associated with the Jagannath culture<sup>5</sup> such as *Rath Yatra*, *Snana Yatra*, *Chandan Yatra*, and *Nabakalebara*; seasonal and agrarian festivals like *Raja Parba*, *Nuakhai*, *Kartika Purnima*, *Jhamu Yatra*, *Chaitra Amavasya*, and *Bakula Amavasya*; folk performances such as *Pala*, *Danda Nata*, *Ravana Chhaya*, and *Ramlila*; visual arts like *Pattachitra* and *Jhoti Chitra* and folk tales of Goddess Mangala. The data on this selected folklore has been primarily collected from secondary sources, including books and research papers such as Das and Mahapatra (1979), Dash (2022), and Panigrahi (2018). Additionally, the first author being a native of Odisha and having grown up closely observing these cultural practices has enriched the study with her own lived experiences. To ensure the authenticity and reliability of the data collected from the secondary sources, informal interviews were conducted with 10 elderly individuals (6 women and 4 men), aged between 60 and 85 years, from rural areas of Odisha, specifically from the regions of Puri, Bhubaneswar, Kani and Nilagiri. All participants are native to Odisha, born and raised in the state, and possess knowledge of its cultural and spiritual heritage. During the interviews, general open-ended questions were asked in Odia language to gather basic information about the selected folklore and their perceived spiritual significance. Examples of questions included: “ରଜ ପର୍ବ, ବକୁଳ ଅମାବାସ୍ୟା, ଚୈତ୍ର ଅମାବାସ୍ୟା, ଚିତଲାଗି ଅମାବାସ୍ୟା, ଝାମୁ ଯାତ୍ରା, ମକର ସଂକ୍ରାନ୍ତି ଓ ନୂଆଖାଇ ପର୍ବଗୁଡ଼ିକ କିପରି ପରିବାର ସହିତ ଭଲ୍ଲାସରରେ ପାଳନ କରାଯାଏ ବୋଲି ଆପଣ କହିପାରିବେ କି? ଆପଣଙ୍କ ମତରେ, ଏହି ପର୍ବମାନଙ୍କର ଆଧ୍ୟାତ୍ମିକ ମୂଲ୍ୟବୋଧ ଓ ଗୁରୁତ୍ୱ କଣ?” (“Can you talk about how festivals like *Raja Parba*, *Bakula Amavasya*, *Chaitra Amavasya*, *Chitalagi Amavasya*, *Jhamu Yatra*, *Makar Sankranti*, and *Nuakhai* are celebrated with family? In your opinion, what are the spiritual values and significance of these festivals?”)

The responses were recorded via phone. First, the responses were transcribed in the original Odia language and then translated into English. For the analysis of the data taken from primary and secondary sources, we have applied a qualitative thematic analysis approach. We have examined each selected folklore and manually identified recurring spiritual themes and symbolic patterns embedded within them. This approach enables us to uncover the cultural meanings, values, and spiritual significance that these traditions hold within Odia communities.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

To the best of our knowledge, no existing literature on Odisha's folklore has specifically explored its spiritual elements. While several academic works have examined other dimensions of folklore such as social, cultural and linguistic aspects, this area remains underexplored. In this section, we first provide an overview of the history of folklore research in Odisha, followed by a review of recent works that highlight various facets of Odia folk traditions and festivals.

Das and Mahapatra (1979) and Panigrahi (2018) provide a complete overview of the work pursued on the folklore of Odisha during the pre- and post-independence periods. During the pre-independence era, John Beames and T. E. Revenshaw were among the first to take an active interest in the history and background of Odisha's folklore. Other researchers, such as Seikh Abdul Mazid, Nilamani Vidyaratna, Chandrasekhara Bahinipati, and Pandit Raghabananda Nayak, also collected folk materials related to farming. Gopal Chandra Praharaj, a connoisseur of Odia's comprehensive lexicon, collected folk tales and published the volume "*Utkala Kahani*", which remains popular today. Laxminarayan Sahu, a *Bharata Sevaka Samaj* member, collected songs, tales and other cultural aspects from various ethnic groups in Odisha, published in 1942 as "*The Hill Tribes of Jeypure*". He also studied *Danda Nata*<sup>6</sup>, a dance drama of Odisha. Sahu's contributions have helped preserve and showcase the region's cultural traditions for future generations.

Moving into the post-independence period, Verrier Elwin, Chakradhar Mahapatra, Kunja Bihari Das, Dr. K. C. Behera and Dr. Natabar Samantray were among the valuable authors whose works were significant. Dr. Bhabagrahi Mishra completed his PhD thesis on Verrier Elwin under the supervision of the well-known American folklorist Richard M. Dorson. In addition to several papers, Dr. Prasanna Kumar Mishra, Aurobinda Pattanaik, Hemanta Kumar Das, Dr. Shyam Sundar Mohapatra, and Dr. Kailash Pattanaik all made noteworthy contributions to the study of folklore during this period.

Dr. Kunjabihari Das gained widespread recognition for his book "*A Study of Orissan Folklore*", written in English in 1953. Dr. Kunjabihari Das and Professor L. K. Mahapatra wrote a book titled "*Folklore of Orissa*", which was published in 1979. Dr. K. B. Das wrote many papers on Orissan folklore in English and Oriya and collected a vast collection of folk songs and tales. Dr. Das's dedication and long-term commitment to his work were responsible for his success in collecting such a large corpus of materials. In addition, he contributed to the prevailing trend in the study of folklore by dedicating a chapter in his thesis to the "motifs" of Odishan folktales.

Dr. Mahendra Kuma Mishra's various publications, such as "*Lok Sanskrutibit Nilakantha*" (1990) and "*Oral Epics of Kalahandi*" (2008), are noteworthy. The curiosity and rapidly developing interest in the study of folklore in Odisha is also evident, with the subject being taught as an additional paper in the



M. A. Oriya curriculum. The Academy of Tribal Dialect and Culture in Bhubaneswar, headed by Dr. Khageswar Mohapatra, made commendable efforts to collect, study and publish works on tribal folklore.

Recently, many researchers have tried to work on the priceless collections of folklore of Odisha. Mohanty (2005) discusses the rich cultural heritage of Odisha, focusing on the spiritual belief and worship of Lord Jagannath as a unifying factor among the people of the state. The author emphasizes that the Jagannath culture embodies the principle of universality, making it a mass culture accessible to all. The paper delves into the influence of Jagannath culture on various aspects of society, such as its impact on the state's literature, the spiritual lives of its people, and its social influence. The author highlights how the culture of Lord Jagannath has played a significant role in shaping the identity and culture of Odisha and its people. Furthermore, the author discusses the various religious practices and rituals associated with Lord Jagannath, viz., the annual *Rath Yatra* festival, which attracts millions of devotees from all over India and the world. The author also explores the role of literature in promoting and preserving the Jagannath culture, including the significant contributions made by poets and writers in the region.

Das (2011) discusses the rich spiritual culture of Odisha and emphasizes how the socio-cultural consciousness of the state's people is imbued with a deep love and devotion for Lord Jagannath. The author believes this consciousness is rooted in a perfect blending of religion and ethics, forming the bedrock of the state's socio-cultural values. The author explores the significance of the folk dance form of *Pala* in the context of the state's cultural traditions. *Pala* is a source of entertainment and inspires people to be more religious, moral, truthful and spiritual. Furthermore, the paper provides an in-depth analysis of how the *Pala* dance form is directly concerned with the life of people and how it serves as a powerful tool for promoting spiritual and moral values. The author highlights the various religious and moral themes portrayed in the dance form, such as the triumph of good over evil, the importance of truthfulness and the virtues of love and devotion.

Patnaik (2017) highlights how the traditional aspects of folklore are disappearing due to rapid technological advancements, migration and the adaptation of new traditions. The continuous changes in our society and people's way of life are negatively affecting the practice and preservation of folklore. The author emphasizes the need to rediscover and preserve our rich cultural heritage by documenting folklore. This documentation aids in visualizing the richness and diversity of the folklore, which can be helpful in its revival and promotion.

Mahapatra and Samantray (2017) highlight the significance of Jagannath consciousness in the literature of Odisha. They emphasize how the concept of inner peace is well established in the spiritual beliefs of the people of Odisha and how it has been reflected in their literature. They explain how the literature

of Odisha presents Jagannath consciousness as a way to attain world peace through inner peace. The authors further discuss the various aspects of spirituality and inner peace and how they differ from person to person. They note that spirituality is a subjective experience that can manifest differently for different individuals. They also highlight how inner peace is essential to achieving a peaceful world, as it promotes a sense of harmony and balance within oneself.

Panigrahi (2018) discusses how Odisha has many rural villages with a strong cultural heritage, including folklore. This folklore has been passed down for many generations and has been a part of Odisha's culture for centuries. The author refers to prevalent literary works and discusses the different types of folklore, such as the age-old customs, folktales, ballads or chants, beliefs and rituals etc.

Dash (2022) underlines the significance of evaluating traditional Odia oral literature's socio-cultural and literary potential. The author discusses popular folk stories and poetic plays in the context of their familiarity and popularity, emphasizing themes such as eco-consciousness, socio-cultural bonds, spiritualism and moral values. Additionally, the work delves into the rich history and tradition of oral narratives in Odia literature, deciphering its various forms and styles. In doing so, the writer sheds light on these age-old traditions' cultural and literary significance, highlighting the need for their preservation and promotion.

Malaya and Das (2022) highlight how rich folklore traditions risk disappearing due to the effects of urbanization and globalization. They express concern over how the authenticity of age-old folk traditions is gradually getting lost in the digital age. The authors emphasize the need to preserve traditional forms of literature in the face of rapid technological advancement. They acknowledge that technology is a crucial aspect of modern-day life, and one cannot survive without it. However, they also believe it is possible to incorporate traditional folklore and folk traditions into modern technology to ensure their preservation and longevity.

Dash (2022) evaluates the sociological, cultural and literary significance of the popular Odia oral literature. This oral literature includes many elements, including lullabies, folk tales, myths, legends, proverbs, riddles and more. Dash explores the potential of this rich cultural tradition to contribute to the social and literary landscape of Odisha. The evaluation findings reveal that these oral traditions are deeply intertwined with the region's socio-cultural fabric and serve as a vital source of identity and continuity for the Odia people. Furthermore, Dash's evaluation highlights the literary potential of these oral traditions. The use of metaphors, allegories, and other literary devices in these tales demonstrates the richness and complexity of Odia oral literature. The study also reveals that these traditions offer a unique insight into the Odia people's worldview, beliefs, and values.

According to Satpathy (2021), the unique grand embodiment rituals of the wooden deities that are of Lord Jagannath, Lord Balabhadra and Goddess Subhadra take place every 8-19 years in a proper sacred setting. In the article, the author has well explained the different phases such as locating the “*daru-brahma*”<sup>7</sup> that are the neem trees showing divine signs, the midnight “*brahma-padartha*”<sup>8</sup> or the spiritual transfer of the deity’s life essence and the eventual burial of the old wooden idols. The author further elaborates on the exclusivity of *Nabakalebara* to Puri that has been well explained with reference to the Hindu rebirth rituals and beliefs, showcasing the secrecy of the traditions and the devotees’ faith in spirituality.

Pattanayak (2016) discusses in their work how the renowned Jagannath culture empowers the marginalized communities and gives the oppressed their voice via the concept of *Patitapabana*<sup>9</sup>. The author states that the Jagannath culture represents devotion and dedication towards the deity amongst the common people and people of all social classes that transcends the modern ideas of globalisation. The author also explains that the Jagannath culture has eclectic dimensions of Lord Jagannath through elements such as the folk legends, songs and rituals showing how the tradition instills communal harmony and a shared spiritual experience. Additionally, he states that the rituals and practices of *Nabakalebara*<sup>10</sup> symbolise the rejuvenation of the gathered moral and ethical principles in today’s world.

In another work by Bhuyan and Pattnaik (2025) the Jagannath culture explores the deep interconnection between folklore and the socio-cultural framework of Odisha. The authors express that whether it is through the oral traditions, customs and rituals, they all serve as a reflection of the shared human experiences and the cultural values. According to the authors, the Jagannath culture transcends religious boundaries and embodies the spirit of Indian cultural heritage. They also believe that the festivals and rituals of the Jagannath culture foster togetherness and communal harmony by uniting people across all social strata.

Krishna (2013) explains how the astronomy-based rituals and festivals in Odisha play a pivotal role in maintaining social harmony in a highly modernized world. The work focuses on the fact that even while the 21st century has brought along a lot of technological and scientific conveniences, it has also led to the decline in traditions and values. In order to support the above sentence, the author explains how the traditional festivals and rituals, such as *Kartika Purnima*<sup>11</sup>, *Chaitra Amavasya*<sup>12</sup>, *Bakula Amavasya*<sup>13</sup> act as strong cultural custodians in the state. According to the author, the agrarian festivals in Odisha mark the significant events in farming and agriculture while also portraying the importance of spirituality.

Majhi (2025) explains that the festivals in Odisha are unique due to the seamless fusion of religious significance, regional folklore, artistic expressions and community participation. The work further explains that the celebrations

such as *Raja Parba*<sup>14</sup>, *Nuakhai*<sup>15</sup>, *Kartika Purnima*, *Chaitra Amavasya*, and *Bakula Amavasya* showcase the religious and spiritual versatility of the state. The author states that the festivals range from agrarian festivals to cultural festivals, each of them holding significance in the way they are celebrated and for the purpose they are celebrated. The author also highlights that such festivals and traditions reinforce social solidarity across all castes and classes.

Das (2022) underlines the importance of the celebrations in mid-June in Odisha called *Raja Parba* that is dedicated towards honouring menstruation, both biologically and ecologically. The author states that the celebration goes on for three consecutive days during the onset of monsoon, temporarily pausing agricultural work in order to offer rest to Mother Earth. In addition to this, the author states that the women are barred from any kind of physical activities, chores at home and instead are asked to indulge in pampering themselves, wearing new clothes and singing folk songs.

Pasaya (2011) discusses the festival of *Nuakhai* which celebrates the new fruit of the season in Odisha. The author states that this has been the cause of the integration and the unity of the tribal and non-tribal people in Odisha. He further highlights that the concept of the festival originated with the cause of appreciation for the growth of rice, which is symbolic of life.

Dash (2017) states that one of the most unique socio-cultural events in Odisha is the *Kartika Purnima* that brings around the *Baliyatra* on the banks of the Mahanadi River. The author states that the festival is reminiscent of the ancient Odisha overseas businesses with far-off lands. The author believes that the trade and commerce fair called *Baliyatra*<sup>16</sup> is symbolic of reverence for the *Sadhabas* or the sea traders sailing off to Bali.

In the words of Dash and Dambhare (2016), Odisha celebrates a wide range of festivals throughout the year that are closely associated with agricultural cycles. The author discusses that the traditions such as *Makar Sankranti*<sup>17</sup>, *Raja Parba*, *Rath Yatra*<sup>18</sup>, and *Kartika Purnima* are not merely spiritual observations, but also bring in joy and communal harmony. The work shows that delicacies like pitha or rice cakes, milk-based sweets are an essential component of the traditions.

Kumari et al. (2022) discuss in their work that Odia delicacies such as *aarisa pitha*, *kakara pitha*, *manda pitha*, and *chakuli pitha*<sup>19</sup> prepared in most households during festivities symbolise devotion, culinary wisdom and the cultural heritage of Odisha. The authors state that these homemade dishes also carry nutritional and nutraceutical properties. To explain it further, the authors discuss how some of the delicacies even have anti-inflammatory properties because of the use of natural turmeric in them. The work highlights that due to fast-paced modernization, these cultural delicacies are starting to lose their significance which is why it is necessary to spread awareness, document the process of making them and incorporate these dishes into contemporary cuisines.

Biswal and Dash (2020) discuss how the folk traditions of Odisha, art forms like *Jhoti*<sup>20</sup> and *Pattachitra*<sup>21</sup> have major cultural relevance in the state. The authors explain how these art forms are not just restricted to their looks, but they show cultural relevance and artistic significance in the state of Odisha. According to them, these practices of *Jhoti* and *Pattachitra* are closely linked with traditions and agrarian lives, and they represent harmony between man, nature and the divine. The authors believe that the art forms are losing their authenticity and charm because of the fast-paced urbanization of the world, which is why it is necessary to preserve them by greater awareness, documentation and promotion of the art forms.

## THE CONCEPT OF FOLKLORE

The term “folklore”, formed by combining “folk” and “lore”, was introduced in 1846 by William Thoms. He created this word to substitute for the phrases “popular antiquities” or “popular literature”. The origin of the second part, “lore”, can be traced back to Old English “lār”, meaning “instruction” (Wikipedia). Folklore refers to the entire collection of oral traditions that are shared within a specific group, culture, or subculture. This encompassing term includes a wide array of elements, such as tales, myths, legends, proverbs, poems, jokes and various other forms of oral heritage. Additionally, folklore includes customary practices that align with folk beliefs, as well as the patterns and ceremonies associated with celebrations like Christmas, weddings, folk dances and initiation rites. Unlike subjects commonly taught within formal educational systems or explored in the realm of fine arts, folklore is not typically acquired through traditional curriculum or academic study. Instead, these traditions are informally transmitted from one individual to another, either through spoken guidance or practical demonstration. According to Dundes (1965: 3)

*folklore includes myths, legends, folktales, jokes, proverbs, riddles, chants, charms, blessings, curses, oaths, insults, retorts, taunts, teases, toasts, tongue-twisters, and greeting and leave-taking formulas...It also includes folk costume, folk dance, folk drama, (and mime), folk art, folk belief (or superstition), folk medicine, folk instrumental music (e.g., fiddle tunes), folksongs (e.g., lullabies, ballads), folk speech (e.g., slang), folk similes (e.g., as blind as a bat), folk metaphors (e.g., to paint the town red), and names (e.g., nicknames and place names) ... oral epics, autograph-book verse, epitaphs, latrinalia (writings on the walls of public bathrooms), limericks, ballbouncing rhymes, jump-rope rhymes, finger and toe rhymes, dandling rhymes (to bounce the children on the knee), counting-out rhymes (to determine who will be “it” in games), and nursery rhymes ... games; gestures; symbols; prayers (e.g. graces); practical jokes; folk etymologies; food recipes;*



*quilt and embroidery designs; house, barn and fence types; street vendor's cries; and even traditional conventional sounds used to summon animals to give them commands; ... mnemonic devices (e.g. the name Roy G. Biv to remember the colors of the spectrum in order), envelope sealers (e.g. SWAK – Sealed With A Kiss), and the traditional comments made after body emissions (e.g., after burps and sneezes), ... festivals and special day (or holiday) customs (e.g., Christmas, Halloween, and birthday).*

The above definitions imply that folklore encapsulates a wide range of components. It encompasses everything that a community of people creates and passes down through generations, reflecting their collective identity, values, experiences and creativity. It is a living repository of the customs, stories, arts, beliefs, rituals and expressions that define a particular group's cultural heritage. Folklore holds significant importance within a society. It serves many functions, offering both entertainment and educational value. It plays a pivotal role in shaping and moulding the societal norms and moral codes, offering guidance and entertainment. Moreover, folklore acts as a cultural archive, providing insights into historical events, cultural practices and the ways in which humans have interpreted the world around them. Studying folklore allows us as learners and researchers to gain a deeper sense of understanding of diverse and varied cultures. Folklore serves the purpose of building a bridge between generations.

In this study, the term “folklore” is used to encompass a broad spectrum of oral traditions, ritual practices, performative arts and visual culture which are deeply embedded in the spiritual and cultural heritage of Odisha.

## THE UNDERSTANDING OF SPIRITUALITY

Exploring the concept of spirituality, Taggart (2001: 325) opines that “...it is in the nature of spirituality to be elusive. Whilst some ... want to be clearer on what it is, ... others strongly resist giving it a definition at all, knowing the tyrannical, restrictive power of definitions”. Similarly, Badrinarayanan and Madhavaram (2008) state that no universally accepted way to define spirituality has been agreed upon by either the spiritual or scientific community. Zohar (2000) also argues that defining spirituality may be nearly impossible. While many agree that defining spirituality is a challenging task, some researchers still attempt to explain this complex concept. Hodge (2010), drawing on the works of Carroll (1997), Sermabeikian (1994) and Spero (1990) explains spirituality as a bond with a Transcendent Being or Ultimate shaped by a particular spiritual tradition. This bond nurtures a sense of sanctity, destination and meaning in life, which gives rise to virtues such as altruism, love and forgiveness. These virtues, in turn, influence one's connection with the creation, self,



others and the Ultimate. Hodge (2010) also notes that spirituality is shaped by a particular social context and while religion is one form of spiritual tradition, there are other non-institutionalized spiritual beliefs and practices.

Furthermore, specific activities associated with a particular spiritual tradition can indicate spirituality. According to Muldoon and King (1995: 336), spirituality is “the way in which people understand and live their lives in view of their ultimate meaning and value”. Vaughan (1991: 105) describes spirituality as “a subjective experience of the sacred”, while Murray and Zenter (1989) characterize it as “a quality that goes beyond religious affiliation, that strives for inspirations, reverence, awe, meaning and purpose, even in those who do not believe in any god” (cited in de Jager Meezenbroek et al. 2012: 338). De Jager Meezenbroek et al. (2012: 142) defines spirituality as “‘one’s striving for and experience of connection with the essence of life’, which encompasses three main dimensions: connectedness with oneself, connectedness with others and nature, and connectedness with the transcendent”. Numerous research studies emphasize the significance of connectedness concerning spirituality. There are different facets of connectedness, such as “authenticity, inner harmony/inner peace, consciousness, self-awareness and the search for the meaning of life”, which are demonstrated differently in humanity (Hedstrom et al. 1988; Young-Eisendrath & Miller 2000, cited in de Jager Meezenbroek et al. 2012: 339). Additionally, “compassion, caring, gratitude and wonder” are facets of connectedness to others and nature (de Jager Meezenbroek et al. 2012: 339). “Connectedness to the transcendent refers to connecting to something” or a being not of the Earth, such as the universe or higher powers, like God (Ibid.)

Diving deep into the concept of spirituality, Bennet and Bennet (2007) come up with the following 13 dimensions of spirituality: “Aliveness, Caring, Compassion, Eagerness, Empathy, Expectancy, Harmony, Joy, Love, Respect, Sensitivity, Tolerance and Willingness”. According to Mahoney and Graci (1999), “spirituality seemed to include the following attributes: charity (a sense of giving, service), community (a sense of connection, relationship), compassion, forgiveness (and peace), hope, learning opportunities, meaning (purpose), and morality (a sensitivity to right and wrong)”.

After going through the previous definitions of spirituality, our understanding of spirituality is that it is a multifaceted concept that involves a feeling of connectedness with oneself, others, nature, and the transcendent. It is an individual’s subjective experience of the sacred and their ultimate meaning and value in life. Some spiritual beliefs may be based on religious or philosophical traditions, while others may stem from personal experiences or intuitions. It also discusses our connection with nature, mystical experiences and the belief in spirit communication. This connectedness can happen through various means, such as meditation, prayer, yoga, psychic practices, religion, rituals, nature walks, environmental activism, a ritual honouring nature, etc.

Spirituality may be a source of solace, motivation, and development for many individuals.

## THE SPIRITUALITY EMBEDDED IN THE FOLKLORE OF ODISHA

Spirituality is deeply ingrained in India's glory, culture, tradition and customs. Sages and saints have spoken about the wisdom of spirituality for ages. There are plenty of references to spirituality in terms of removing pain and misery from human life. Throughout different centuries, different cultures have taken a resort to spirituality and tried to achieve sublime peace through spirituality and pass on the same practice to the newer generation. Odisha is one such state that could be considered the treasure trove of the origins and stories of spiritual practices. Odisha's spirituality is firmly established in its extensive cultural history and traditions. Many temples and sacred places are located throughout the state, including the well-known Jagannath temple in Puri. Meditation, yoga, and *ayurveda*<sup>22</sup> are other widely-practised spiritual disciplines in the state. The spirituality of Odisha constitutes a significant aspect of its cultural identity, and it exerts a profound influence on the lives of its inhabitants. The deep-rooted belief in the spirituality of the people of Odisha is also reflected in its folklore collections, such as folk religion, rituals, traditions, beliefs, practices, songs, dance, folk tales etc. Although the folk religion in Odisha combines various religious beliefs, including *Hinduism*, *Buddhism*, *Jainism*, and tribal religions, the focus of the religious rituals and festivals discussed in this paper is primarily based on the Hindu religion, which is the dominant religion in the state. These rituals and festivals are deeply imbued with a sense of spirituality and reflect the strong faith of the people of Odisha in their religious traditions. Odisha's folk music and dance are fundamental to its cultural identity and also exude spirituality. The moral precepts of many folktales emphasize the value of traits like compassion, generosity and dedication.

Furthermore, some folktales deal with the theme of *karma*, signifying the importance of right deeds over wrong ones. The following section is divided into three parts, aiming to explore the profound theme of spirituality woven within the elements of Odisha's folklore. The first part explores how spirituality is reflected in the rituals of the Jagannath cult, while the next section examines the spirituality of other religious traditions in Odisha. The last section focuses on how spirituality is reflected in other components of Odisha's folklore, such as dance, song, art etc.

## THE MANIFESTATION OF SPIRITUALITY IN THE VARIOUS RITUALS AND TRADITIONS OF THE JAGANNATH CULT

Odisha is renowned for its sacred pilgrimage, Puri, home to the world-famous Jagannath temple. The Jagannath cult's evolution, temple, and diverse rituals

and traditions manifest a fusion of varied religious doctrines, including tribal beliefs, *Brahminism*, *Vaishnavism*, *Saivism*, *Shaktism*, *Tantricism*, *Buddhism*, and *Jainism*<sup>23</sup>. The inception of the Jagannath cult in Puri remains a mystery, as Tripathy (2012) and Pradhan (2004) pointed out. The rich tapestry of legends surrounding the origin and development of the Jagannath cult are found in sacred Hindu texts such as the “*Skanda Purana*”, Sarala Dasa’s “*Mahabharata*”, “*Madala Panji*”, “*Deola Tola*”, “*Brahma Purana*”, “*Padma Purana*”, “*Kapila Samhita*”, “*Niladri Mahodaya*” and the “*Bamadeva Samhita*<sup>24</sup>” etc. Numerous scholars like B. M. Padhil, G. C. Tripathy, A. Eschmann, H. Kulke, B. Mohanty, N. K. Sahu, K. C. Mishra, S. Mohanty, and G. N. Mohapatra have dedicated their research and exploration to delve into the origins of the Jagannath cult. While variations exist among the legends and the study conducted by historians and anthropologists, a common thread that emerges in these narratives is the close association of the tribal people, known as Savaras, with Lord Jagannath as well as the connection of Lord Vishnu or Krishna with the deity.

The legend mentioned in the “*Purusottama Mahatmya*” of the “*Skanda Purana*” holds special significance among the various tales about the origins of the Jagannath cult. This particular legend is widely accepted and believed by the Jagannath temple of Puri. As per the story, King Indradyumna, who was believed to be a great devotee of Vishnu, was a king of *Satya Yug*. Once, the king learned about the God Nilamadhab, who was in Nilachal (blue hill) worshipped by the tribal community *Savaras*<sup>25</sup>. Vidyapati, the trusted minister of Indradyumna, was sent to collect information on Nilamadhab. Vidyapati went to Nilamadhab with the help of Viswavasva, who was believed to be the king of the tribal community. After being informed about the place by Vidyapati, when the king reached there, to his surprise, nothing was visible to him. In his dream, he saw a wood log coming from the Svetadipa, where God Vishnu appeared in blue form. Subsequently, a wooden record appeared with the signs of Vishnu floating in the sea to the shore.

Sarala Das, in his “*Mahabharata*”, shows the connection of Krishna with Lord Jagannath. In the *Vana Parva* and *Musali Parva*<sup>26</sup>, he shows Lord Jagannath’s appearance after Krishna’s death. When Arjuna, with the help of *Savara* Jara, who had killed Krishna, tried to burn the corpse of Krishna, only the palms, legs and nose were burnt, not the whole body. Then a divine sound was heard “Fire cannot devour this body. It will be worshipped for a long time on the *Nilasundar*<sup>27</sup> hill. Put out the fire. Remove the body and set it afloat on the sea” (Das 1969: 52). Accordingly, Arjun placed the body in the sea, gave the charge of the body to Jara and returned to Dwaraka. After some time, Krishna appeared in Jara’s dream, and on his awakening, he found an image of Vishnu beside him and started worshipping God, hiding it beneath a tree on *Dhauli*<sup>28</sup> Hill. Many years later, King Gala Madhaba, who was devoted to Vishnu, brought the Vishnu image to Nilgiri since God was unwilling to stay in *Savara* village as King Gala Madhav massacred it.

Meanwhile, Jara looked for Krishna's body near Konark. Indradyumna, upon hearing that God would reside in Nilgiri, built a temple with the help of Viswavasnu. Krishna appeared to Jara and revealed his wish to appear as Buddha temporarily. Krishna transformed into a wooden log in the Rohini Kunda, and Jara, Indradyumna, and Vasudeva retrieved it. With Viswakarma's assistance, Jara carved the wooden log into the images of Balabhadra, Subhadra, and Jagannath. To hide the wooden form of Jagannath, Jara applied resin from the *Sal* tree. This way, the images of Balabhadra, Subhadra, and Jagannath were revealed.

The ancient Sanskrit text "*Niladri Mahoday*" also tells a similar story with slight variations, revealing a deep connection between Krishna and Jagannath. The narrative tells of a moment when Krishna rested under a tree in a forest near Nilgiri. Tragically, the hunter Jara Savara mistakenly perceived Krishna's feet as those of a deer and inadvertently caused his demise. When Jara tried to cremate the body, only certain parts were burnt, for it was the divine form of Lord Vishnu himself. Consequently, he left the remaining body near the sea of Puri, known as *Banki Muhan*<sup>29</sup>. Many centuries later, King Indradymna dreamt about the wooden log of Krishna's divine which remained at *Banki Muhan*. Acting upon this vision, he carved an image from the log and enshrined it in the magnificent Jagannath temple. This act marked the foundation of the revered deity's worship. The story of Krishna's death in the story also aligns with the narratives mentioned in the concluding part of the Mahabharata. In this episode, Krishna informs Arjuna that now that the war is over, he will retreat to a distant forest of creepers, where he will eventually meet his end near the sacred site of Jagannath Puri. The two stories parallel each other, affirming the link between Krishna's demise and his connection to Jagannath Puri (Khuntia 2009).

After considering the above legends, it becomes evident that Lord Jagannath is a revered deity among tribal and Hindu communities. However, certain scholars propose an alternative perspective, suggesting a possible Buddhist origin of the Jagannath cult and its temple. According to this viewpoint, the image of Jagannath is believed to house the tooth relic of Buddha, and rituals such as the *Snan yatra* (Bathing ceremony) and *Rath yatra* (chariot festival)<sup>30</sup> are thought to have connections to Buddhist practices. In addition, the practice of sharing *Kaivalya*<sup>31</sup> (sacred food) equally among all castes is seen as having been influenced by Buddhism (Pradhan 2004). Jayadev, a Vaishnavite poet from the 20th century, acknowledged Buddha as the ninth incarnation of Krishna and Vishnu. Similarly, in his "*Mahabharata*", Sarala Das considered Jagannath to embody both Krishna and Buddha.

While there are varying opinions on the deity's original identity, accepting Jagannath's evolution into a representation of Vishnu or Krishna is widespread. Many scholars agree that in its earliest form, Jagannath was called Purushottama. The name Purushottama, deeply rooted in Vaishnavism, further

strengthens the bond between Jagannath and the tradition of Hindu worship. This connection between Purushottama and Jagannath is mentioned in several Hindu texts, such as *Vishnudharma Purana*, *Vaman Puran* and *Anargharaghava Natakam* by Murari Mishra (Pradhan 2004). According to Sahoo (2021), the evolution of *Vaishnavism* in Odisha can be traced back to the worship of Nilamadhab at *Nilachala*, even before the emergence of the Jagannath trinity in the form of *Darubrahma* during the reign of Indradyumna. The legend of *Vaishnavism*'s evolution is mentioned in various ancient texts, including the *Purusottama Kshetra Mahatmya* of "Skanda Purana", *Musaliparva* of Sarala "Mahabharata", "Deulatola" of Sisu Krishna Das. Nilambar Das, K. C. Das also references these accounts, pinpointing Nilagiri as the place where *Vaishnavism* originated (Sahoo 2021). Initially, it was part of the *Savara* land under the guidance of Viswavasus.

However, later, it transformed into a centre for Vishnu worship, becoming an institutionalized religion embraced by various communities in Odisha. Various ancient sources such as "Silpa texts", "Mahabharata", "Manusmriti", and "Ramayana" offer ample evidence of the evolution of *Vaishnavism* and its diverse influences on its growth. With time, *Vaishnavism* received momentum under royal patronage. During the Ganga and Suryavamsi dynasties, the belief in *Vaishnavism* reached its height. Throughout history, various scholars and saints of *Vaishnavism*, such as Ramanujacharya, Nimbarkacharya, Madhvacharya, Vallabhacharya and the celebrated poet Jayadev, have made significant contributions to the spiritual landscape of Puri and its devotion to Purushottam-Jagannath. Jayadev's "Gita Govinda" masterpiece was pivotal in *Vaishnavism*. This poetic composition beautifully portrayed the passionate and divine relationship between Radha and Krishna, which added a new perspective to Eastern *Vaishnavism*.

"Gita Govinda" was incorporated into the temple's worship and rituals, which firmly entwines the concepts of Radha-Krishna devotion and the Jagannath culture in the tapestry of East Indian *Vaishnavism*. Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, a revered saint and spiritual leader, forged a strong connection between Gaudiya *Vaishnavism* and Jagannath culture. Throughout his lifetime, Chaitanya Mahaprabhu resided in Puri for 20 years, and through his teachings and spiritual enthusiasm, he inspired numerous individuals. His influence led them to cultivate a profound connection with Lord Jagannath, and they started incorporating Jagannath worship into their practice of Gaudiya *Vaishnavism*. This fusion of traditions resulted in a unique blend of devotion, wherein the love for Lord Krishna and Jagannath intertwined. Thus, the veneration of Lord Jagannath became an integral part of Gaudiya *Vaishnavism*, especially among Bengalis who embraced this combined expression of devotion. Khuntia (2009) highlights that *Vaishnavism*'s core principles resonate strongly with the beliefs and practices of Jagannath culture. A true *Vaishnavite* is a devoted servant who selflessly surrenders to the almighty before taking any action, relying not on



personal strength or worldly possessions but on divine guidance. They view the world and the physical body as comprising *Achetana* and *Chetana*<sup>32</sup> – the transient and the awareness of the Supreme Divine Being within. In the context of the Jagannath temple and its rituals, devotees wholeheartedly embrace the concept of surrender to the divine will. Their actions are guided by a deep sense of devotion and humility, seeking to establish a direct connection with the invisible God residing within them. By recognizing the impermanence of the physical body (*Achetana*) and acknowledging the significance of the inner Divine (*Chetana*), Jagannath's followers strive to transcend the limitations of the material world. The fundamental essence of *Vaishnavism*, which focuses on selflessness, devotion and a profound connection with the divine, perfectly aligns with the beliefs and values upheld in Jagannath culture. By incorporating these principles into their lives, devotees of Jagannath embark on a spiritual journey, seeking to strengthen their bond with the almighty and attain spiritual fulfillment and inner peace. Thus, the connection between *Vaishnavism* and Jagannath culture reinforces the profound significance of surrendering to the divine will and nurturing a deep, soulful connection with the Supreme Being.

In addition to its strong association with *Vaishnavite* beliefs, the Jagannath deity encompasses the essence of *Saivism*, the worship of Lord Shiva, and *Shaktism*, the worship of the divine feminine energy. Scholars have observed that the image of Lord Jagannath shares similarities with Ekapada Bhairava, a form of Lord Shiva, showing the coexistence of *Saivism* within the tradition (Pradhan 2004). This association is particularly prominent during the annual *Rath Yatra* festival, where Lord Jagannath's chariot is accompanied by images of Shiva and other deities, symbolizing their interconnectedness. Moreover, the rituals and practices at the Jagannath temple in Puri often exhibit elements of both *Vaishnavism* and *Shaivism*. The temple's daily routines include offering flowers, water and other sacred items to the deities, standard practices in both *Vaishnavite* and *Shaivite* traditions. Additionally, some scholars suggest that the "*Nilachala Purana*", an ancient text related to the Jagannath cult, references *Shaivite* practices and beliefs.

*Purusottama Kshetra*<sup>33</sup> is also notable as a *Shakti pitha* (*paada pitha*)<sup>34</sup>, where Sati's foot is believed to have fallen, as per the *Daksha Yajna* story. The site has deep-rooted connections with *Shaktism* in India, evident in various literary, traditional and archaeological references. The "*Matsya Purana*" identifies *Purushottama Kshetra* as a *Shakti pitha*, with the presiding goddess Vimala. The "*Kalika Purana*" refers to *Odrapitha* as a renowned *Shakti Pitha*, associated with worshipping goddess Katyayani and Lord Jagannath. In tantric lore such as "*Rudra Yamala*", "*Tantra Yamala*", Lord Jagannath is revered as Bhairava, and Vimala is worshipped as Mahadevi. The *Devi Bhagavata* designates Vimala as the *Kshetra Shakti* (Pradhan 2004; Mallik 2022; Prabhas 2005).

Subhadra's image, known as Ekanamsa, is considered the embodiment of Durga or Katyayani and the sister of Krishna and Baladeva. Her association



with Durga is evident during the *Rath Yatra*. Her chariot, *Devdalan*, is adorned with nine representations of goddesses, which are either aspects of Durga or her incarnation Navadurgas, represented by Harachandi, Bhadrakali, Barahi, Katyayani, Mangala, Vimala, Uma, Ramachandi, and Aghora. Jayadurga and Tripursundari serve as the deities of the flag and protectors of the chariot. The “*Niladri Mahoday*” describes Devi Subhadra as the incarnation of various divine forms, including Vaishnavi, Brahmani, Shiva, Rudrani, Kalaratri, Mahalaxmi and Jagadamba. She is worshipped with the Bhubaneswari mantra, signifying her role as the *gnana*<sup>35</sup> (knowledge) ‘Sakti of Lord Jagannath’. Many experts believe that how Subhadra is depicted in religious art resembles the Goddess Khambesvari. This similarity indicates that Subhadra might have been a part of the Jagannath triad during the Somavamsi period (Mallik 2022; Pradhan 2004). The *Durga Madhava Rath Yatra*, also known as *Sakta Gundicha Rath Yatra*, is a festival representing the interconnectedness between *Vaishnavism* and *Shaktism* very strongly. This festival takes place in September–October. Durga, a Sakta deity and Madhava, a *Vaishnavite* deity, are worshipped in this festival (Mallick 2005).

The stories, myths, customs, traditions, rituals, beliefs etc., associated with the Lord Jagannath and his temple provide a profound sense of connection with the divine and help devotees to cultivate love, kindness and compassion, which are integral to the concept of spirituality. The Jagannath culture emphasizes the value of togetherness and harmony. The temple is open to individuals of all castes and creeds, and it is managed by a group of priests from various castes who cooperate to maintain the temple’s efficient operation. Devotion, service and community define the spirituality of the Odia Jagannath culture. With its message of love, compassion and unity, the culture has significantly impacted the advancement of the state’s religious and cultural recognition. It continues to motivate millions of people worldwide. The idea of *seva*, or service, is at the heart of the Jagannath culture’s spirituality. Lord Jagannath’s followers feel as though they are serving the Lord by taking part in the rituals and festivities held at the temple. The worship of the Lord is the centre of the temple’s daily activities, and thousands of devotees come there each day to pray and seek blessings. Lord Jagannath is not regarded merely as a physical entity but as a manifestation of the divine energy permeating the universe. The people’s devotion, belief and conviction in God are so profound that they transcend the physical realm and touch the spiritual plane.

Lord Jagannath is a divine entity that embodies both spiritual and material aspects, simultaneously representing physical, metaphysical and abstract experiences. He is both a seeker and a giver, symbolizing various divine personalities such as Krishna, Rudra, Brahma, Kali, Daga, Kshma and Sat-Chitta-Ananda, signifying the existence of truth, consciousness and bliss. He represents the essence of universalism, humanism and integration and is a profound and mysterious entity (Mahapatra 2020). Lord Jagannath’s vibrant and dynamic

culture is associated with the concept of spirituality in many ways. First of all, Lord Jagannath is revered as a divine incarnation of Lord Vishnu. Every year millions of devotees assemble at Puri to offer their prayers to God. In the worship of Lord Jagannath, different rituals, practices, beliefs and traditions are observed and performed, which help devotees attain salvation by connecting with the spiritual light. A deep spiritual significance is attached to all these rituals. The most famous festival of the temple is the *Rath Yatra*.

The historical origins of *Rath Yatra*, the grand chariot festival, continue to be shrouded in mystery despite extensive research by scholars. References and narratives about *Rath Yatra* are strewn across Hindu epics, mythologies and ancient texts. Choudhary (2016) and Mahapatra (1987) have delved into these references, shedding light on the *Raths*' enduring presence in ancient literature. The "*Rig Veda*", one of the oldest sacred texts in Hinduism, alludes to *Raths* moving through the skies, symbolizing celestial chariots with three storeys and drawn by horses. Panini, a renowned grammarian and philosopher, makes mention of *Ratha* while analyzing the terms '*Rathastha*, *Rathaganak*'<sup>36</sup>, and others, providing linguistic evidence of the significance of chariots in ancient society. In the *Ramayana*, an epic attributed to Sage Valmiki, there is a distinction between the *Pusya Ratha* used in games and the divine *Marut Ratha* employed by celestial beings.

Similarly, references to *Ratha* can be found in other revered texts such as the "*Bhagwat*", "*Mahabharata*", "*Vishnu Purana*", Kautilya's "*Arthashastra*" and "*Sukra Niti*", further highlighting its pervasive importance in ancient Indian literature. The "*Brahma Purana*" provides a detailed account of the *Yatra*, while the "*Padma Purana*" and the "*Skanda Purana*" offer vivid descriptions of the festive celebrations. Additionally, the "*Kapila Samhita*" also contains references to the revered *Ratha Yatra*. Fascinatingly, even Buddhist literature, such as the "*Lalita Vistara*" and "*Buddha Carita*", refers to *Ratha*, showcasing its presence in diverse religious and philosophical traditions.

Das (2016) also mentions that the motif of the *Rath* as a carrier for gods finds its roots in ancient Hindu texts. The "*Rig Veda*" beautifully symbolizes the hymn as the chariot that connects humans to the divine, bridging the gap between mortals and gods. Moreover, the seers who composed the Vedic verses are revered as the creators of such divine chariots. Further exploration in the "*Taitreeya Brahmana*" reveals the personification of Prajapathi attributing the chariot's components to various aspects of Vedic poetry. Metres are likened to the chariot itself, Gayatri and Jagati become its sides, and Usnil and Tristubh take the role of side horses. Anustubh and Pankti are the yoke horses, and Brahti is the seat. This symbolic association demonstrates the profound significance of chariots in Vedic literature. Even in the Upanishads, the metaphor of the chariot and its rider represents the relationship between the body and the *Atman*. This analogy further emphasizes the spiritual journey where the *Atman* navigates the chariot of the body through life's experiences.

The origins of *Rath Yatra* are intertwined with several mythical stories reflecting the people's beliefs in the region. One story narrates how Lord Krishna and Balaram were invited to Mathura by their wicked uncle, Kansa. They left for Mathura on a chariot, which devotees now celebrate as *Rath Yatra*. Another tale commemorates the day Krishna defeated Kansa and gave darshan to euphoric devotees in Mathura while riding a chariot with Balaram. Devotees in Dwarka celebrate the day Krishna and Balaram took Subhadra for a chariot ride, showcasing the city's splendour. The story of Vrajkatha explains how Krishna, Balaram and Subhadra are believed to forever reside in the Puri temple of Lord Jagannath due to a boon granted by Narad.

Moreover, the story of Krishna becoming the charioteer of Arjuna during the *Mahabharata* battle is celebrated. After Krishna's cremation, King Indradyumna of Jagannath Puri dreamt of sanctifying wooden statues of Krishna, Balaram and Subhadra in a temple. The statues, pulled in majestic processions during *Rath Yatra*, are changed every 12 years, and the Jagannath Puri temple stands as one of India's four most sacred temples. It remains a unique temple housing sibling deities – Lord Krishna, Balaram and Subhadra – drawing devotees from around the world to celebrate the divine journey of *Rath Yatra*.

This festival takes place on the second day of the bright fortnight in the month of *Ashadha*<sup>37</sup>. A sea of devotees assembles at Puri to witness this holy festival. This festival involves removing the deities of Lord Jagannath, Balabhadra and Subhadra from their temples and placing them on a giant chariot. Countless devotees join together to pull the *rathas* through the city's streets while chanting the sacred name Hari. The festival is marked by a series of rituals that require extensive preparation and effort. The chariots are embellished with floral decorations and paintings, and music, dance, hymns, chants etc, accompany the celebration. The *Ratha Yatra* festival holds deep spiritual significance, as described in many ancient texts and scriptures.

With the chariot symbolizing the human body and the Marathi symbolic of God, the festival symbolizes the soul's journey towards enlightenment. The owner of the chariot, who represents the soul, travels with the Marathi, who represents God, to their final destination – the abode of the Lord. The chariot's wheels signify perseverance and determination, while the horses represent the senses. The ground on which the chariot rides stands for the virtues necessary for spiritual development, such as vitality, tolerance, self-control, charity and discrimination. The horses' reins stand for attributes like sympathy, composure and forgiveness, which are necessary for successfully navigating life's journey. Therefore, to attain spiritual fulfilment, one must surrender unconditionally to the supreme Marathi, God or a God-realized soul, and embark on the journey towards transcendence from the material world. In essence, the *Ratha Yatra* festival serves as a reminder of the spiritual journey that every individual must undertake to attain liberation from the cycle of material existence. It emphasizes the importance of surrendering to a higher power and embodying

virtues such as perseverance, self-discipline and compassion to traverse life's journey successfully. In addition, the pulling of the chariots during the *Rath Yatra* event holds enormous spiritual importance. Through this sacred act, people render selfless service to the divine by purifying their souls and body and, thus, getting closer to the divine light. It represents the journey of the soul towards transcendence and spiritual growth.

The *snana yatra* or the bathing ceremony is another significant ritual at the temple. Traditionally, this festival occurs on the full moon day in the month of *Jyestha*, considered Lord Jagannath's birthday. The deities are taken in procession from the Jagannath temple to the *Snana Bedi*<sup>38</sup> during this event. They are bathed with 108 water pots and ornamented for public view. On this occasion, hundreds of thousands of devotees visit the temple. According to the *Skanda Purana* and the legends, King Indradyumna was the first person to have organized this ceremony for the first time when the idols of the deities were initially built. This ceremony is believed to represent the purification and renewal of spiritual energy. The devotees of Lord Jagannath believe that if they visit the temple on this auspicious day, they will be cleansed of all their sins. Another important festival celebrated once every 12 to 19 years is *Nabakalebara*, or the New Body festival. In this festival, the old wooden idols of the deities are replaced with new idols that are carved from a sacred neem tree. In this festival, devotees prepare food for God with great care and devotion and the ritual in which the food is offered to God is called *Bhoga Mandap*<sup>39</sup>. This ritual is also practised with the belief that it purifies and renews the spiritual energy of God. This festival is the onset of the annual *Ratha Yatra* celebration. In this festival, devotees try to embellish chariots with new clothes and flowers to prepare them for the yearly *Ratha yatra* festival with utmost devotion and surrendering to God.

*Chandan Yatra*, or the Sandalwood festival, is another important ritual which evokes the theme of purification and devotion. The ceremony involves the anointing of the deities of Lord Jagannath with *chandan*<sup>40</sup> (sandal). In this festival also, the devotees offer their *seva*<sup>41</sup>, or selfless service. The deities are taken in a procession to the *Narendra* pond, where they are given baths and decorated with new clothes and jewellery. The procession is accompanied by musicians, dancers and devotees who offer their prayers and perform acts of service and devotion.

In all these rituals, devotees undertake a spiritual journey by offering selfless service, devotion and dedication and surrendering to God. Devotees forget about all human worries and frustrations by offering prayers, fasting, working day and night and preparing Prasad for God. They thus are motivated and inspired by their 'guru' Lord Jagannath, who acts as a spiritual guide or protector. 'Seva' is a spiritual practice and discipline which is an integral part of the daily ritual at the temple where devotees perform various services to the deities, such as cleaning, cooking, offering food, assisting people, spreading knowledge about Lord Jagannath and Jagannath culture.

*Dharma*, *Karma* and *Moksha*<sup>42</sup>, three essential aspects connected with spirituality, are also greatly emphasized in the lesson of Lord Jagannath. *Dharma* refers to doing the right thing and having good morals, *Karma* is the idea that our actions have consequences, and *Moksha* means breaking the cycle of birth and death. The temple has traditions such as offering food to the deities and giving visitors *Prasad*<sup>43</sup> to promote kindness and selflessness. Doing good things and giving to others can create cheerful *Karma* and lead to spiritual growth. Devotees aim to achieve *Moksha* by meditating and praying.

## THE MANIFESTATION OF SPIRITUALITY IN OTHER RITUALS AND TRADITIONS OF ODISHA

Some other religious rituals and traditions considered to be means of attaining spirituality are *Jhamu Yatra*, *Chitalagi Amavasya*, *Chaitra Amavasya*, *Bakula Amavasya*, *Raja Parba* etc.

The *Jhamu Yatra* is an important festival celebrated every year in the Puri district of Odisha. The festival is known for its unique and awe-inspiring rituals, with the fire walk being among the most prominent. This ritual is believed to have spiritual significance for the participants, as it is viewed as a form of devotion and a way to connect with a higher power. During the fire walk, participants are said to be possessed by deities or a higher force, which enables them to overcome the pain of walking on hot coals with their bare feet. They believe their bodies are being controlled by the divine, and this possession allows them to perform miraculous feats that would otherwise be impossible. Walking on hot coals is also seen as a form of penance or purification, with participants seeking to rid themselves of their sins or negative energies. By undergoing this physical trial, they hope to achieve a state of spiritual purity and renewal. The water pots carried on their heads during the fire walk are believed to symbolize water's cleansing and purifying power, further emphasizing the spiritual significance of the ritual.

The celebration of *Amavasyas* is a cultural practice of Odisha with deep spiritual significance. The *Chitalagi Amavasya* or *Chitou Amavasya* festival is an example of the intersection between spirituality and agriculture. This festival is primarily celebrated in rural areas and is considered to be an important event for farmers who depend on the land for their livelihood. The festival begins with farmers purifying themselves through a bath in a river or other water body. This act of purification is believed to cleanse the body and mind of impurities, preparing the farmers for the ritual of offering prayers to their paddy fields. Once they are cleansed, the farmers offer prayers to the gods and goddesses associated with agriculture, seeking blessings for a bountiful harvest and protection from pests and other destructive forces. The prayers and offerings made during the *Chitalagi Amavasya* festival are believed to establish a spiritual connection between the farmers and the land they cultivate.



The significance of *Chaitra Amavasya* lies in its spiritual energy, as it is believed to be an auspicious day for performing *pitra dosha* puja. According to Hindu mythology, *pitra dosha* refers to the sins and negative karma accumulated by one's ancestors that may affect their present life. Performing *pitra dosha*<sup>44</sup> puja on *Chaitra Amavasya* is believed to help liberate oneself from these karmic debts and pave the way for a brighter future. The ritual involves bathing in a water body before offering prayers and donating to the poor and needy. This act of charity is considered a way of seeking forgiveness for the sins of one's ancestors and balancing their negative karma. The donations can be in food, clothes, or money and are given to the underprivileged to help alleviate their suffering. Taking a dip is said to wash away one's sins and prepare them for the spiritual journey ahead.

*Bakula Amavasya* is another significant festival that falls under the category of *amavasyas*. This festival typically falls during May or June when the mango trees blossom across the state. During *Bakula Amavasya*, the mango trees are worshipped, and people string garlands around them to symbolize their reverence. *Pithas*<sup>45</sup>, a sweet dish made from rice flour and jaggery, are also offered to the trees as a form of thanksgiving. The festival is important for farmers and mango cultivators who rely on trees for their livelihood. The spiritual significance of *Bakula Amavasya* is rooted in the belief that performing certain rituals can help ward off negative energies and promote positive growth. In Hindu mythology, *shani dosha* and *pitra dosha* refer to negative karmic points affecting one's life and well-being. It is believed that performing specific rituals during *Bakula Amavasya* can help counteract these negative energies and promote positivity and growth.

*Raja Parba* or *Raja Festival* is an important festival celebrated for three days, usually in June. The festival is mainly celebrated by young girls and women, who consider it a celebration of fertility and womanhood. The festival has a deep spiritual significance and is associated with the worship of Mother Earth, considered the giver of life and fertility. On the first day of the festival, the female members, particularly young unmarried girls and mothers-to-be in the families, wake up before dawn and take a purificatory bath in a river or any other water body after lathering their bodies with turmeric paste and oil. This bath is believed to purify the mind, body and soul, and it is a symbol of cleansing and rejuvenation. Traditionally, bathing is prohibited on the remaining two days of the festival, and women are not supposed to walk barefoot, grind, cut or cook or do any household chores. They wear *Alta* and a lot of jewellery and dress in new clothes. During all three consecutive days, women eat *pithas* at their houses and their friends' houses, move up and down on *jhulas*<sup>46</sup> (swings), and sing merry *Raja Odia* songs. The festival celebrates womanhood and the happiness of the earth being fertile. It is celebrated for women and *Bhudevi*<sup>47</sup>, the earth. In Odisha, it is believed that the divine wife of Lord Jagannath is *Bhudevi*, who undergoes her menstrual cycle during this period before the onset of



rain. Spiritually, the festival is considered significant because the whole point revolves around doing festivities for the women of the state. Women are supposed to take care of themselves and pamper themselves. They are expected to let go of all their chores and only rest for those consecutive days. The festival symbolizes the earth preparing itself to get washed off in the first rains so that old memories wash away and new ones set in, inducing the spirit of rejuvenation. The Raja festival celebrates the power of the feminine and the earth's fertility, emphasizing the importance of rest, rejuvenation and the renewal of the self. It reminds people of the need to care for the earth, the women in their lives and themselves. The festival's spiritual significance lies in how it celebrates life and the beauty of nature, encouraging people to embrace the divine feminine and the rejuvenating power of the earth.

*Kartika Purnima*, also known as *Boita Bandana* or *Panchuka*<sup>48</sup>, is a significant festival celebrated in the state of Odisha. This festival is observed in the month of *Kartika* (October–November) as per the Hindu calendar. According to Das and Mahapatra (1979), *Kartika Purnima* stems from the historic yearly departure of trading expeditions on boats to the far-off Southeast Asian mainland and islands from the shores of ancient Odisha when maritime trade was at its best. The people of Odisha, actively engaged in maritime trade during ancient times, used to worship the sea god Varuna and seek his blessings for a safe journey during the monsoon season. The spiritual significance of *Kartika Purnima* lies in its association with Lord Vishnu and his incarnations. This day is considered auspicious for spiritual pursuits, especially for those seeking enlightenment and liberation. The day is dedicated to Lord Vishnu, and devotees offer prayers and perform special rituals to seek his blessings. *Kartika Purnima* is also a day for expressing gratitude and seeking forgiveness. During this festival, some people choose to fast; some people prefer to eat only vegetarian food during that particular period. Elderly people acquire the habit of consuming *habisa*<sup>49</sup> and rice, and they believe that all of this is a process to make themselves feel complete in context to their religious and spiritual beliefs. As the sacred month nears its end, people prepare for *Chaadakhai*<sup>50</sup>, celebrated the day after the full moon. Today, people indulge in non-vegetarian dishes, a release from the religious taboo of withholding the desire to eat non-vegetarian dishes.

*Samba Dashami*, also known as *Surya Puja*, is a significant festival celebrated in Odisha. It is observed in the Hindu calendar on the 10th day of the *Shukla Paksha* (bright fortnight) in the month of *Margashirsha* (November–December). The festival is dedicated to Lord Surya, the Hindu sun god. The spiritual significance of *Samba Dashami* lies in its association with the mythology of the Mahabharata. According to legend, Samba, the son of Lord Krishna, was cursed with leprosy by Saint *Durvasa*. Samba and his wife and children worshipped Lord Surya and were blessed with a cure for his illness. The day is believed to be when Samba was cured of his disease, and it is observed as a day of gratitude and devotion towards Lord Surya. The festival also holds great importance for

women who pray to Lord Surya for their husbands' well-being and long life. Married women observe a fast on this day and deliver water to Lord Surya during sunrise. The water is believed to have healing properties and is said to cure various illnesses. *Samba Dashami*<sup>51</sup> is a day for seeking blessings and expressing gratitude towards the sun god. It is believed that one can attain good health, prosperity, and success by worshipping Lord Surya on this day. The festival also promotes the values of family and togetherness, as families come together to offer prayers and celebrate the day with traditional rituals and customs.

## THE MANIFESTATION OF SPIRITUALITY IN FOLK PERFORMANCES, FOLK TALES, FOLK ARTS AND CRAFTS

*Pala* is a unique form of folk performance art in Odisha, India, blending classical Odia music, theatre and poetry in Odia and Sanskrit. Its cultural and spiritual significance can be traced back to the 16th century during the Mughal era when it was created to promote Hindu-Muslim unity. This traditional art form is an expression of communal harmony and has evolved to become an essential part of Odisha's cultural heritage. A typical *Pala* group comprises 5 to 7 members, with the leader known as *Mukhia* or *Mukhya Gayak*<sup>52</sup>. The *Mukhya Gayak* is distinguished by unique ornaments, large earrings, necklaces, and carries a whisk and a pen or stick while singing. The *Sri Palia*<sup>53</sup> supports the leader by repeating stanzas, and the *Bayak*<sup>54</sup> plays the drum called *Mrudanga*<sup>55</sup>. The remaining members, known as *Palia* or the chorus, repeat the songs and stanzas along with the leader and *Sri Palia*. The *Mukhya Gayak* does not play any musical instrument; the *Bayak* plays the *Mrudangam*, and all others play the cymbals called *Jhanja*<sup>56</sup>. This combination of instruments creates a rhythmic and melodious backdrop for the performance. *Pala* performances often draw inspiration from episodes in the Mahabharata and Ramayana. Stories like Laba and Kusha singing Ramayana in Rama's court or Nachiketa singing Vedas at the door of Yamraj find representation in *Palas*. *Pala* is considered a medium to connect with the divine, and the performers view themselves as mediums to communicate with the gods through their art. During the performance, the artists believe that they attain a heightened state of consciousness, allowing them to transcend their physical and material limitations and connect with the divine realm.

Among the folk performances of Odisha, *Gotipua* dance stands out as a profound expression of devotional art. Performed by young boys dressed as women, this tradition is believed to have originated in the 16th century during the reign of the Bhoi dynasty, particularly as a response to the decline of the *Mahari* dance tradition. *Mahari* was performed by female dancers as a ritual offering to deities within the temples of Odisha. As this sacred practice began to fade due to shifting social and religious dynamics, *Gotipua* emerged to carry forward its spiritual legacy – now performed in more public and accessible

spaces. The young male performers, initiated into temple service at a tender age, underwent rigorous training to enact divine narratives through expressive movements and acrobatic postures. Typically centered on Radha-Krishna lore, *Gotipua* dance is far more than entertainment; it is a manifestation of devotional surrender that establishes a spiritual connection between the performers and the audience. The spiritual depth and artistic vocabulary of *Gotipua* later influenced the development of *Odissi* dance. Today, *Odissi* is recognized as one of India's classical dance forms. It is widely believed to have evolved from both *Mahari* and *Gotipua* traditions, and it continues to be an integral part of Odisha's cultural identity. According to Pradhan (2016), Jayadev's *Gita Govinda* is regarded as "a Bible of an Odissi dancer" and has profoundly shaped the form's thematic and aesthetic framework. With its graceful postures, intricate hand gestures, expressive storytelling, and rhythmic footwork, *Odissi* stands out as a refined and spiritually resonant art form. Its performances convey intense devotion and emotion through exquisite artistry.

*Ramlila*<sup>57</sup> is a dramatic folk representation of the life of Rama, the seventh *Avatara* of the Hindu deity Vishnu and the central figure of the epic "*Ramayana*". The "*Ramayana*" and its associated literature, like the "*Ramacharita Manas*" written by Tulsi Das, serve as the foundation for these theatrical performances. Tulsi Das composed this sacred text in the sixteenth century, written in Hindi, to make the Sanskrit epic accessible to all. It is devoted to the glory of Rama, the heroic figure of the *Ramayana*. *Ramlila* refers to the grand millennium celebration of Rama, featuring melodramatic plays and dance episodes. In the state of Odisha, there is a rich tradition of *Ramlila*. The main highlight of this performance tradition is the *Dussehra* celebration. The demon Ravana is traditionally burnt in this celebration, often with fireworks. This ritual is known as *Ravana Podi*<sup>58</sup>. In Odisha, *Ramlila* is known by various names, such as *Asureswara Yatra*, *Lankapodi Yatra*, and *Sahi Yatra*. Unlike its north Indian counterpart, the Odia *Ramlila* takes place in March-April, known as *Chaitra* in the Odia calendar. It coincides with *Ramanavami*, the celebration of Rama's birthday. The performances usually span ten to fifteen nights and are based on regional renditions of the Rama story, passed down through oral and written traditions (Dash 2018).

*Ramlila* is not just a theatrical performance or a folklore event; it also carries profound spiritual significance for the participants and the audience. Through the enactment of life and the divine incarnation of Lord Rama, the audience gets the opportunity to witness and connect with the divine play (*Lila*) of the Supreme Being. The battle between Rama and Ravana symbolizes the eternal struggle between good and evil forces. This portrayal serves as a reminder of the constant battle within oneself to overcome negative tendencies and embrace virtuous qualities. In addition, the *Ramlila* stories are rich in moral and ethical teachings. The actions and decisions of the characters in the play offer valuable lessons on dharma (righteousness), devotion, sacrifice and compassion,

inspiring the audience to follow a virtuous path in life. *Ramlila* often includes devotional songs and hymns dedicated to Lord Rama, fostering an atmosphere of *bhakti* (devotion) among the participants and spectators.

Furthermore, *Ramlila* is a community event that brings people from diverse backgrounds together to celebrate a shared cultural and spiritual heritage. It promotes unity, brotherhood and communal harmony, transcending social barriers. This performance serves as a medium to connect with the divine and imbibe moral and spiritual values. It is a cultural tradition that has entertained generations and played a significant role in promoting spiritual growth and awakening among individuals and communities.

Shadow puppetry is one of the oldest forms of puppetry, which is performed in many states of India like West Bengal, Odisha, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh etc. In Odisha, shadow puppetry is known as *Ravana Chhaya*<sup>59</sup>. However, there are many explanations behind this nomenclature. Pani (1978) states that Lord Rama, an incarnation of God Vishnu, is a radiant and luminous being, meaning he does not cast a shadow (cited in Singh 2020). Considering this belief, combining the word “shadow” with his name would seem inappropriate. However, it is ironic that the puppet of Rama in the performance does cast a shadow on the screen, despite this notion.

Additionally, the depiction of Rama in the puppet form is designed in stark contrast to Ravana’s towering and striking figure (Singh 2020). According to a myth recounted by the artists, the origin of the term “*Ravana Chhaya*” is associated with a fascinating incident after Rama, Lakshmana and Sita returned to Ayodhya from their exile in the forest. Upon their return, Sita’s palace companions requested that she sketch an image of Ravana. They were intrigued because Sita mentioned that she never saw Ravana during captivity. She recounted that they travelled in a magical flying chariot called the *Pushpak Viman* during her abduction by Ravana. During this frightening journey, she caught a glimpse of Ravana’s shadow on the water below. From that moment on, this story of the shadow on the water became known as the origin of the term “*Ravana Chhaya*”. The puppets used in the *Ravana Chhaya* performance are crafted from deerskin and stand at a maximum height of 2 feet. With their tribal appearance, they possess a unique charm and simplicity. Unlike other puppets, they lack separate body parts, giving them a distinctive, cohesive form. The inspiration for their performance comes from the oral storytelling of the “*Bichitra Ramayana*”, a captivating literary masterpiece written by Vishwanath Khuntia. Through these enchanting puppets, the timeless tale of Ramayana comes to life, mesmerizing audiences with its cultural significance and artistic beauty. The narratives portrayed in *Ravana Chhaya* usually include vital episodes from the Ramayana, such as Sita’s abduction, Rama’s search for Sita, Hanuman’s journey to Lanka, and the epic battle between Rama and Ravana.

*Ravana Chhaya* carries profound spiritual themes that resonate with the audience and convey spiritual messages through artistic expression. Some of

the key spiritual themes of *Ravana Chhaya* are that *Chhaya* often portrays the eternal conflict between good and evil, represented by Lord Rama and Ravana, respectively. The story of Rama's adherence to *dharma* and Ravana's pursuit of *dharma* serves as a spiritual lesson about the importance of upholding moral values and the consequences of deviating from them. Lord Rama's victory over the powerful demon king Ravana symbolizes the ultimate victory of virtue and righteousness over vice and wickedness, as a spiritual reminder that goodness will prevail in the end. Rama's unwavering devotion to truth, duty and righteousness and his complete surrender to the divine will, exemplify the path of *bhakti* (devotion) and *vairagya* (detachment).<sup>60</sup> This theme emphasizes the importance of surrendering to a higher power and seeking inner transformation through spiritual devotion. The character of Sita in the Ramayana embodies purity, patience and resilience in the face of adversity. Her unwavering faith in her husband Rama and her steadfastness through trials and tribulations inspire the audience to cultivate virtues like patience and faith in their lives.

*Pattachitra*<sup>61</sup> paintings are a traditional art form of Odisha inspired by Hindu mythology, particularly Jagannath and *Vaishnavite* traditions. The paintings are created using natural colours and are traditionally made by *Chitrakaras* or Odia painters. *Pattachitra* is derived from the Sanskrit words *patta*, meaning canvas, and *chitra*, meaning picture. Puri, Raghurajpur, Paralakhemundi, Chikiti and Sonepur are some places where this ancient art form is still practised. *Pattachitra* paintings are highly revered by people worldwide, and it is believed that a journey to Puri is complete with taking back some *Yatiripatis* of Lord Jagannath. These exquisite paintings narrate mystical stories from the Ramayana, Mahabharata, and the divine Lord Jagannath. The most beloved and captivating theme is that of Lord Krishna, who embodies love, compassion and playful divinity.

The paintings showcase Krishna's birth in Mathura's prison, his miraculous childhood in Gokul, and his playful adventures with cowherd friends. As Bala Gopala, young Krishna's radiant smile lights up the canvas. His joyous escapades with the Gopis, stealing butter from pots, and playing enchanting tunes on his flute resonate with splendour. Also, the *Chitrakars* bring to life Krishna's role as a protector and warrior in the Mahabharata. Scenes of him guiding Arjuna on the battlefield of Kurukshetra as a charioteer and narrating the sacred "*Bhagavad Gita*" are portrayed with great reverence and brilliance. *Pattachitra* paintings also narrate stories from Lord Jagannath's legendary history and the temple's rich heritage. *Pattachitra* paintings vividly capture the essence of Lord Jagannath's divine grace, mythical tales and significance in the hearts of millions of devotees. *Pattachitra* paintings are deeply embedded in spirituality as they have their roots in religion and are considered replacements for deities' idols. The intricate and detailed depictions of deities, scenes from mythology and spiritual symbols are believed to have the power to inspire, uplift and transform the viewer's consciousness. They are seen as an embod-



iment of divine energy and are considered a way of connecting with the divine source. *Pattachitra* paintings are also believed to be a form of meditation and a way of invoking the divine presence within oneself. Creating the paintings is a meditative experience, where artists channel their creative energy towards creating a spiritual masterpiece. When viewed with reverence and devotion, the paintings are believed to have the power to transmit positive energy and create a spiritual atmosphere in the surroundings.

*Jhoti Chitra*<sup>62</sup>, also known as *Chita*, is a traditional art form of Odisha where beautiful and intricate designs are drawn on the floor and walls of homes using rice paste. The *Jhoti* or *Chita* are not just made to decorate the house, but they are also symbolic and meaningful. The designs are usually drawn during auspicious occasions such as weddings, births, festivals etc. On several occasions, figures and patterns are manually drawn on the houses' floors and walls. One of the prominent examples is that of the time during Lakshmi Puja. Small red dots with white dots are made on the surfaces as the combination of red and white signifies the worship of Shiva and Shakti. Despite urbanization, this conventional tradition continues in the families of Orissa. *Jhoti* is considered a means to attract goddess Lakshmi, hence prosperity into homes. The spiritual significance of *Jhoti Chitra* lies in its connection with the Hindu concept of purity and sanctity. Drawing *Jhoti Chitra* is seen as a way of purifying and sanctifying the home and the surrounding environment. The intricate designs and patterns are believed to be a symbolic representation of divine energy and are used to invoke the blessings of the deities. Moreover, drawing *Jhoti Chitra* is considered a form of meditation, where the artist focuses on the task and enters a state of concentration and mindfulness. Drawing the designs is a form of devotion and connecting with the divine source. The positive energy generated by drawing *Jhoti Chitra* is believed to purify the mind and soul, thus leading to spiritual upliftment.

Mangala is a popular folk goddess worshipped in Odisha, India. The story of Mangala is based on a local legend that revolves around a woman named Mangala, who was born into a low-caste family. She was a devout devotee of Lord Jagannath, the presiding deity of Puri, and would regularly visit the temple to offer her prayers. One day, Mangala was on her way to the temple when a group of high-caste Brahmins stopped her. They told her that she was not allowed to enter the temple premises as a low-caste person. Mangala was heartbroken but refused to give up her devotion to Lord Jagannath. Instead, she decided to build her temple for the deity. Mangala went to a nearby forest and started collecting wood to build the temple. However, she was soon faced with another challenge. The forest was inhabited by a demon who did not want the temple to be built. The demon tried to scare Mangala away by making loud noises and creating havoc in the forest. But Mangala was not deterred. She prayed to Lord Jagannath for help and was blessed with divine powers that helped her defeat the demon. The story of Mangala is spiritually significant to the people of Odisha



because it represents the triumph of good over evil and the power of devotion and faith. The story teaches that even in the face of seemingly insurmountable obstacles and challenges, the power of devotion and faith can overcome them. Mangala's unwavering belief in Lord Shiva and her willingness to undergo various hardships to please him inspire many devotees. Moreover, the story highlights the significance of the Hindu concept of karma, where Mangala is rewarded for her good deeds and punished for her evil deeds. It also emphasizes the importance of dharma, or righteous conduct, as Mangala is portrayed as a virtuous and pious woman dedicated to serving her family and community.

Another popular story widely read in the households of Odisha, taken from the Ramayana, is the tale of Lord Hanuman and the *Sanjeevani*<sup>63</sup> Hill. Dated back to the time when Lord Rama and Lord Lakshmana were in a battle with Indrajit and his troops in Sri Lanka, there had come a situation when Indrajit fought Lord Lakshmana and was severely injured. Since Lord Lakshmana had fallen to the ground and could not fight any further, Lord Hanuman was informed about the life-restoring herb, *Sanjeevani*, that grew and thrived only on the *Dronagiri* mountain in the Himalayas. Meanwhile, Ravana had tried to distract Lord Hanuman so that he could not find the herb and bring it to Lord Rama and Lakshmana.

Nevertheless, as determined and dedicated to Lord Rama and Lakshman, Lord Hanuman fought the obstacles and headed out for the *Sanjeevani* herb. As it became dark, Lord Hanuman found it challenging to find the herb, and eventually, he picked up the entire hill on his shoulders and left for Sri Lanka. Later, the herb paste was made and applied to Lord Lakshmana's wounds and everyone else injured in the war. Lord Lakshmana felt good, and both he and Lord Rama thanked Lord Hanuman for the devotion he showed through his actions. The story highlights Lord Hanuman's unwavering faith and devotion towards Lord Rama. He remains dedicated to his Lord's well-being despite facing challenges and obstacles. This unwavering faith symbolizes the deep spiritual connection and surrender to a higher power, often seen as a central aspect of spirituality. Lord Hanuman's willingness to risk his life and carry the entire hill to retrieve the life-restoring herb shows his selflessness and willingness to sacrifice for the well-being of others. Selfless service and sacrifice are considered essential aspects of spiritual growth and development.

## CONCLUSION

The above discussion reflects that Odisha's different elements of folklore, viz rituals, dance, song, tales, art and craft, create a strong connection between human beings and spirituality. The people of Odisha communicate important spiritual messages through their folklore, including the importance of devotion, faith and the pursuit of a higher purpose. Various rituals, practices and traditions associated with the worship of Lord Jagannath, such as *Rath Yatra*,

*Chandan Yatra*, and *Nabakalabara* help devotees attain salvation by connecting them with the spiritual light. Besides these, the people of Odisha observe many other religious rituals and festivals that are deeply connected to spirituality. Rituals like *Jhamu Yatra*, *Chitalagi Amavasya*, *Chaitra Amavasya*, *Bakula Amavasya* and *Raja Parba*, etc. are considered means of attaining spirituality. Other folk practices and traditions such as *pala*, *danda nata*, *Ravana Chhaya*, *Ramlila*, and *pattachitra*, etc. are fundamental to its cultural identity and exude spirituality. Many folk tales of Odisha, such as the tales of Mangala, emphasize the value of traits like compassion, generosity and dedication. By examining Odisha's diverse traditions, rituals, dances, songs, arts, and tales, this paper showcases the richness and beauty of the cultural heritage of this region. Thus, it serves as a source of inspiration and motivation for the people of Odisha, particularly the younger generation, to actively participate in the practice, promotion and preservation of their invaluable folklore collections to safeguard the indigeneity of Odia people.

However, it is essential to mention that this paper has considered only some of Odisha's famous rituals, tales, dances, songs, and arts and crafts from the vast and diverse folklore of Odisha, and there is much more to explore. Future works could explore each folklore component in greater detail and examine how they contribute to the spiritual message of Odisha.

## NOTES

- 1 *Rath Yatra* – Chariot Festival.
- 2 *Chandan Yatra* – Sandal Festival.
- 3 *Nabakalebara* – the festival of the replenishing of the idols of the Lord Jagannath temple of Puri.
- 4 *Jhamu Yatra* – is known as the "fire-walking festival".  
*Chitalagi Amavasya* – is known as the *Chitou amavasya*, *amavasya* being a full moon day.  
*Chaitra Amavasya* – is known as the full moon day in the first lunar month.  
*Bakula Amavasya* – is known as *Bakula Lagi* or the festival of offering mango flowers to the deities in temples.  
*Raja Parba* is also referred to as the *Mithun Sankranti*.
- 5 Given that Odisha is widely regarded as the Land of Jagannath and Jagannath culture holds an important place in shaping the region's cultural and spiritual identity, this study includes the rituals of Jagannath culture as components of Odisha's folklore.
- 6 *Danda Nata* means punishment drama and is a festival celebrated in Odisha.
- 7 *Daru Brahma* – representation of Lord Jagannath in form of the wooden idol.
- 8 *Brahma Padartha* – sacred substance believed to be the life source of Lord Jagannath, Lord Balabhadra and Goddess Subhadra.
- 9 *Patitapabana* – Sanskrit term meaning saviour.
- 10 *Nabakalebara* – re-embodiment of the deities at Shree Jagannath Temple, Puri.
- 11 *Kartika Purnima* – Hindu festival celebrated on the full moon day of lunar month or Kartika month.
- 12 *Chaitra Amavasya* – Hindu festival celebrated on a new moon day during the Chaitra month.

- 13 *Bakula Amavasya* – Hindu festival celebrated on the new moon day of the Pausha or December-January month.
- 14 *Raja Parba* – the Hindu festival dedicated towards celebrating womanhood.
- 15 *Nuakhai* – Hindu agrarian festival.
- 16 *Balijatra* – the Hindu fair of trade and commerce.
- 17 *Makar Sankranti* – Hindu festival also known as the new year for Odia households.
- 18 *Rath Yatra* – the renowned chariot festival celebrated across the world.
- 19 *Aarisa pitha, kakara pitha, manda pitha, chakuli pitha* – different kinds of Odia delicacies made out of rice powder and water dough and stuffed with ingredients like jaggery, coconut and nuts.
- 20 *Jhoti* – hand drawn murals made with a runny mixture of rice and water in Odia households.
- 21 *Pattachitra* – the renowned folk art in Raghurajpur, Puri, Odisha renowned over the world.
- 22 *Ayurveda* – alternative herbal medicine system with historical roots in the Indian subcontinent.
- 23 Various kinds of sub-religions of Hinduism.
- 24 Names of certain epics and books.
- 25 *Savaras* – tribal community.
- 26 *Vana Parva* is also called the book of the forest. *Musali Parva* – is also known as the book of the fight.
- 27 *Nilasundar* – is the name of a hill.
- 28 *Dhauri* is the name of a hill.
- 29 *Banki Muhan* is an estuary and is otherwise known as the Ramachandi temple.
- 30 *Snan yatra* is known as the bathing ceremony and *Rath yatra* is known as the chariot festival.
- 31 *Kaivalya* means a state of liberation and it is the sacred food offered to the deities.
- 32 *Achetna* and *Chetna* – the states of unconsciousness and consciousness.
- 33 *Purusottama Kshetra* – Puri.
- 34 *Shakti Pitha (paada pitha)* – sacred place of eternal power.
- 35 *Gnana* means knowledge.
- 36 *Rathastha, Rathaganak* are synonyms for *Ratha* or the Chariot.
- 37 *Asadha* – it is the month of June to July in the Odia calendar.
- 38 *Snana Bedi* is the place that is secured for the bathing of the deities.
- 39 *Bhoga Mandap* denotes the offering hall in the temple.
- 40 *Chandan* means sandalwood.
- 41 *Seva* means the service.
- 42 *Dharma, Karma* and *Moksha* – *Dharma* means religion, *Karma* means the work one does and *Moksha* means the salvation.
- 43 *Prasad* refers to the offerings or the bhoga made to the deities that is later served to the people.
- 44 *Pitra dosha* – the bad karma created by the ancestors with their wrongdoing when living in the past.
- 45 *Pitha* – sweet pancake and crepe-like dishes.
- 46 *Jhula* – swings.
- 47 *Bhudevi- Bhumi* or Goddess Earth.
- 48 *Kartika Purnima, Boita Bandana* or *Panchuka* refer to the same festival of boats. *Boita Bandana* means the festival of the floating boats.
- 49 *Habisa* – special traditional recipe of Odisha prepared during the month of *Kartik*.
- 50 *Chaadakhai* – consumption of non-vegetarian food after a month's time.
- 51 *Samba Dasami* refers to the festival of the worshipping of the Sun.

- 52 *Mukhiya* or *Mukhya Gayak* – the prime or lead singers in the troops of *Pala*.
- 53 *Sri Palia* – singer in a *Pala*.
- 54 *Bayak* – drummer in a *Pala*.
- 55 *Mrudangam* – musical instrument used for *Pala* and other folk music.
- 56 *Jhanja* – cymbals used for *Pala* and other folk music.
- 57 *Ramlila* – *Rama's* play is a performance of the *Ramayan* epic.
- 58 *Ravana Podi* – a festival that celebrates the victory of good over evil.
- 59 *Ravana Chhaya* – Shadow Puppetry.
- 60 *Bhakti* and *Vairagya* – devotion and detachment.
- 61 *Pattachitra* – *Patta* means cloth and *Chitra* means painting. It means the art or the painting made on a piece of cloth.
- 62 *Jhoti Chitra* – *Jhoti* means rice paste and *Chitra* means painting. It means the traditional Odia white painting made from rice paste.
- 63 *Sanjeevani* means someone or something that infuses life.

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# Ritual Labour and Maintenance of Tradition in a Village Temple: An Occupational Folklore Approach to Chinese Religion

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**Abstract:** This paper is a study of ritual and profession at a temple in a demolished village in Guangzhou, Guangdong Province, South China. The study focuses on two ritual service providers (RSPs) who 1) offer services within fortune-telling, divination and *feng shui* (geomancy) and 2) serve as intermediaries between worshippers and the deities from Daoism and folk religion who are enshrined in the temple. We take an occupational folklore approach to ask how these RSPs' work, lives and religious practices have been affected by the massive social, economic, political and spatial changes that China has undergone over the past five decades. Bearing in mind the various roles accorded to money, the economy and the market in studies of Chinese religion, we use

semi-structured interviews and participant observation to understand the RSPs' own perceptions of and practices within their profession. We conclude that the RSPs' professional status is important for continuity of ritual culture and religious life.

**Keywords:** China, folk religion, occupational folklore, religious folklore, ritual labour, ritual service providers (RSPs), tradition, village temple

## INTRODUCTION

This is a study of ritual and profession at a village temple in the South China megacity of Guangzhou. This temple is dedicated to a local deity worshipped in scattered villages around Guangdong Province and Hong Kong.

The temple is nothing out of the ordinary. It is of a type that can be found throughout the region. The village, however, is hardly anything at all: The villagers have mostly moved away, the village's buildings have been demolished, and the long-awaited village reconstruction stretches further and further out into the future.

The temple is staffed and maintained by two individuals who assist visitors with religious activities and offer them an array of ritual services. Following Adam Yuet Chau (2019: 45), we term these individuals 'ritual service providers' (RSPs), a group ranging "from *feng shui* masters (geomancers) to Daoist priests, Buddhist monks to sectarian ritualists, fortune-tellers to spirit mediums, and their works deal with funerals, burials, memorial offerings, divination, healing, exorcism, and communal offerings" (Ibid.: 99). This paper takes an occupational folklore approach and uses material from semi-structured interviews and participant observation to ask how these RSPs' work, lives and religious practices have been affected by the massive social, economic, political and spatial changes that China has undergone since the start of the Reform and Opening Up era in the second half of the 1970s. How is it that they are RSPs in a village temple without a village, and how have they adapted their traditions to the realities of today's China?

This paper considers the provision of ritual services as a profession. Professions give rise to a range of traditional behaviours, customs, beliefs and ways of perceiving the world—in short, folklore. Work is a key element of culture, "the central domain in or by which participation in society is made possible" (Koch 2012: 155). Studies of occupational folklore have evolved over time, in keeping with the widening focus and changing ideologies of the discipline of folklore studies itself, a process that is especially evident in the movement of scholarship from agrarian to urban communities (Koch 2012). Both material artefacts and verbal lore are relevant to the ways in which people enculture work space (Neumann 1999). As Thurston (2024) notes, however, folklore studies frequently privileges the notion of a natural maintenance of tradition over the

reality that such maintenance is often very hard ‘work’. Not all work is paid, and even less work is paid well. Yet people find reasons to keep doing it. By perceiving ritual service provision as a profession, we connect with and contribute to wider efforts within folklore studies to understand how socioeconomic factors influence the maintenance, communication and development of tradition.

Below, we set forth our methods and then introduce theoretical approaches to the Chinese religious economy. We then present the spatial and economic context of this village temple before presenting material from our interviews concerning how the RSPs came to the temple, how the village and society have changed in recent years, and how one becomes an RSP and undertakes the work. This is followed by an analysis of the social, economic and political forces influencing the RSPs’ work and then a discussion of the importance of considering money and professionalism within studies of RSPs, both in China and more generally. Our study uses the case of these two RSPs to comment on wider changes within Chinese society, but it must be borne in mind that the experiences discussed here are (like all experiences) personal, individual and subjective.

## METHODS

This paper is based on our interactions with the RSPs and others at the selected village temple in 2023–2025. We are a foreign professor (Adam Grydehøj, 43years old) and a Chinese master’s student (Qi Pan, 24years old) and. This study is part of a wider mixed-methods ethnographic project concerning deities as social actors in South China. The project combines participant observation, autoethnography, semi-structured interviews, ethnographic drawing and analysis of historical texts in and regarding a large number of temples, particularly in Guangdong. Although this project involves engagement with numerous RSPs, deities and religious settings, we focus in this paper on RSPs at one particular temple in order to more fully explore the motivations and forces affecting individual tradition bearers.

This temple has two RSPs, Master Zhang (55) and the junior master (33). We encountered them first as visitors to the temple, with Grydehøj making occasional visits to the temple beginning in October 2022. We then got to know them within an explicit research context: In April 2024, Pan received a horoscope reading from the junior master, whom we then formally interviewed on our research topic. In August 2024, Grydehøj received a horoscope reading from Master Zhang, which we likewise followed with a formal interview. In both cases, Pan carried out the formal interview in Mandarin, with further questions being asked by and clarifications being sought by Grydehøj. On subsequent visits to the temple for prayer, fortune-telling, and other ritual services, we gradually became more familiar with the RSPs. In 2024, Grydehøj and Master Zhang began communicating via machine translation of voice and text

messages in the WeChat app. Our understandings of the RSPs' work and lives were acquired gradually, as we participated in temple activities and observed and spoke with the RSPs, with Master Zhang in particular becoming a long-term research partner (see Karlach 2023a).

In the results section below, we alternate between the interviews with the two RSPs in order to highlight their divergent and convergent perspectives and means of communicating knowledge. We follow this with an analysis of the interviews, with reference to our subsequent observations at the temple, including close observation of Master Zhang's provision of religious services to other individuals who Grydehøj brought to the temple in 2024 and 2025.

The semi-structured interviews covered a range of related topics, including how the contributor came to be an RSP at the temple, what kind of work the contributor does as an RSP at the temple, the nature of the deities enshrined in the temple, and legends connected with the temple. The two RSPs provided informed consent. Master Zhang gave permission for his name to be used, but the junior master requested anonymity. As such, it has been necessary to identify Master Zhang by surname alone so as not to expose the name of the junior master. These are among a wider sample of interviews our research team has undertaken with RSPs in South China.

Studies such as the present one raise complex questions of positionality, reflexivity and dual insider-outsider status (Nadarajah 2007). When the researchers first visited the temple and engaged with these RSPs, they were met with a degree of wariness. As Grydehøj in particular has become a frequent visitor to the temple, his identity as a researcher has been supplemented by identities as a worshipper and a ritual services client. In early 2025, Master Zhang ceased referring to Grydehøj in distant terms as *laoshi* (the teacher) or *laowai* (the foreigner) and began referring to him in more affectionate and intimate terms as *Lao Ge* (literally 'Old Ge'; derived from Grydehøj's Chinese name, *Ge Luhai*). The service provider-client relationship is also relevant, as Grydehøj both purchases services himself and brings new clients to the RSPs. While the researchers seek to avoid prompting in interview contexts, they do not seek to situate themselves as external, objective observers of the studied places and phenomena, something which is in any case neither possible nor desirable (Hufford 1995; Nay 2025).

Although the RSPs are performing kinds of rituals that are widely and openly carried out in China, vernacular religious practices are on occasion subjected to official scrutiny. As such, it is necessary to approach interviews with and research concerning Chinese RSPs with a degree of delicacy in order to encourage mutual trust and understanding.

## RITUAL SERVICE PROVIDERS AND THE CHINESE RELIGIOUS ECONOMY

The ritual services undertaken by the RSPs considered in this article are a kind of knowledge work or information work. However, although these are services are carried out in specific urban settings, most prominently the temple itself, these settings differ from the kinds of office environments present in much of the earlier occupational folklore studies of knowledge workers (e.g., Neumann 1999; Bell & Forbes 1994; Dundes & Pagter 1975; Roemer 1994). Such office environments – widely perceived in the scholarship as stratified and depersonalised and thereby encouraging acts of humour and resistance – are themselves not the end state of urban capitalist society, with the COVID pandemic illustrating how rapidly spatialisations of work can be disrupted.

It is useful to consider the two RSPs as knowledge workers rather than simply as tradition bearers because they themselves perceive their provision of ritual services as a professional activity for which they are exceptionally well qualified. The RSPs do indeed maintain and communicate traditional knowledge that is of cultural importance within their society, but they can only do so consistently and effectively because this is their job. Their ability to perform this work furthermore depends on a range of other cultural, economic, spatial, political and technological conditions (Karlach 2023b).

This has not always been recognised in scholarship concerning religion, given that money is often regarded as essentially profane, as the enemy of the sacred (Eisenstein 2011). In Western culture, this idea finds expression in Jesus' cleansing of the Temple and in Martin Luther's rebellion against the Catholic Church's sale of indulgences. The role of money has nevertheless received considerable attention within studies of Chinese religion in particular, with an extensive scholarship for example on the burning of paper money and valuables (Gates 1987; Scott 2007; Blake 2011) and on temple donations (Liang 2014; Chang 2020; Jia & Xiang & Zhang 2019).

Palmer (2011: 1) criticises the Chinese adoption of the USA-derived 'religious market theory', which "treats religious organizations as firms competing for market share among potential adherents within a religious economy", contending that many religious activities do not involve market exchanges. Palmer (2011) advocates instead for perceiving Chinese religion as primarily a 'gift economy', yet he at the same time emphasises that Chinese culture has long struggled with a tension between commercial magic practitioners and "the otherworldly hermit ideal ... The critique of profiteering by Daoist priests and Buddhist monks is an age-old theme in Chinese literature, often taken up by literati advocates of a pure spirituality" (Ibid.: 23).

RSPs of the kind considered here differ from temple-based monks or sectarian masters. Chau (2010) argues that, in today's socioeconomic and political context, China's folk religious RSPs may be classed among the 'petty capitalists', with operational models resembling those of household artisans and

family-run shopkeepers, a development related to the Reform and Opening Up era's identification of the household as the basic unit of production. Faced with social marginalisation (Wang 2015), RSPs may engage in active professionalisation strategies in order to establish their place in today's Chinese society (Li 2014).

When considering Chinese religion, it is necessary to be wary of overly 'god-centric' approaches. Many of the ritual services undertaken by RSPs on the streetside, at relatively informal village temples, in people's homes and in highly institutionalised monastic settings have little to do with deities. Practices such as fortune-telling, feng shui and *Bazi* readings are related to systems of metaphysical principles, such as those set forth in the *I Ching*. Although these principles presuppose a universe in which gods exist and exert influence, deities are not at the core of the services themselves.

For instance, among the services provided by the RSPs considered in this paper are readings based on *kau cim*, a Cantonese term for divination using bamboo sticks. In the typical *kau cim* divination process at the temple, the customer first purchases incense from the RSP, makes an incense offering to the deities and then asks the deities for guidance through the (magical) selection of a bamboo stick. The RSP is subsequently paid to interpret the meaning of the bamboo stick in accordance with metaphysical principles. Three economic exchanges occur here: 1) The customer takes incense from a shelf and pays the RSP; 2) the customer gives incense to the gods, and the gods give the customer sacred knowledge; and 3) the RSP interprets the sacred knowledge for the customer, and the customer pays the RSP. This accords with what Ahern (1981) terms 'interpersonal divination', in which an RSP assists a customer in interacting with deities, relative to 'non-interpersonal divination' (such as geomancy and *Bazi* readings), in which the RSP's services do not involve the gods at all. By the same token, the exchange that occurs when an individual makes an offering (incense, fruit, money, etc.) to a deity in hopes of receiving blessings or other intangible goods need not involve RSPs.

Beyond the scholarly literature, we frequently encounter people who decry the commercialisation of religion and ritual services. It is a widely held sentiment that many famous temples are overly commercialised, and aggressive marketing of ritual services is common in various contexts. There is an ideal that religion and ritual ought to be treated differently from other kinds of services, which seems present in the popular notion that RSPs should feel a sense of calling and should not provide ritual services solely as a means of making money (unlike, say, a shopkeeper or restaurateur). In this regard, we may note the official state designation of folk religious RSPs as *mixin zhuanyehu* ('household films specialising in superstition'), as individuals who take money but give nothing in return (Chau 2010). When the benefits one receives from a service provider are wholly intangible and are subject to official condemnation, it is especially easy to delegitimise payment for them.



These are complex topics, and there is no clear East–West division in sentiment and approach. As Chau (2019: 129) argues:

*We need to guard against any prejudice toward religious commodification ... due to our own sensibilities toward the connection between money and religion. It might seem that religion in China was somehow not as commoditized in the past as it is today. A brief look at religious practices in dynastic China will quickly disabuse anyone of such a mistaken view. ... The view that religion should somehow be a pure, spiritual pursuit freed from such worldly 'ugliness' as monetary transactions and 'vile' desires is a fundamentalist, elitist, and/or modernist-reformist position that itself needs critical deconstruction.*

We follow Chau (2019: 130) in countering the scholarly 'anti-commodification bias' by being upfront about and noting where possible the prices for ritual services in our case study. We likewise seek to counter this bias by explicitly approaching RSP work as work.

There is a longstanding Orientalist and elite tradition of showing respect for Asian religion in the abstract or as practiced by social elites while deploring the ways in which religion is practiced by ordinary people (Grydehøj & Su 2025). However, elite and vernacular traditions have always interacted with and influenced one another (Yü 2001). The RSPs in this study position themselves as performing highly practical work and are distant from the abstracted methods of more doctrinal and rigidly organised Daoists, but they provide their services on the basis of (inherently exclusive) inherited knowledge and intensive scholarship of religious texts and practices.

A focus on customers, worshippers and those who seek out the gods is valuable for shedding light on the ideas and practices of the mass of people who engage with deities and practice Chinese religion (Grydehøj 2024). Our analytical focus here is on the provision of ritual services as a profession in its own right. The particular RSPs we consider do indeed function as middlemen between worshippers and the sacred: by mediating messages from the gods, by mediating customers' offerings to the gods, and by helping customers navigate a universe infused with sacred principles. Yet they are also professionals engaged in skilled labour who give considerable thought to the technical, social, cultural, political, economic and spatial conditions that make their work with the sacred possible.

Finally, we must note the impossibility of unambiguously identifying the religion practiced at the temple in question. The deities enthroned in the temple derive from Daoism and folk religion (in a broad, non-doctrinal sense), the senior master explicitly states that he is a Confucian and has no interest in Buddhism, and the junior master speaks of providing ritual services that would usually be associated with Buddhism. Daoism, folk religion, Confucianism and

Buddhism have mixed with and influenced one another throughout China's history (Yü 2001). Those who visit the temple to worship or to hire the RSPs for ritual services do not necessarily or even usually associate themselves with any one religion, and the ways in which the RSPs speak reflect the historical development of Chinese religion as a mixed tradition.

## SPATIAL AND ECONOMIC CONTEXT

The temple at the centre of this study sits past the end of the road. When Grydehøj arrived at the village for the first time in October 2022, the temple was bordered to the north and east by rubble and to the west by a locked-up ancestral hall. To the south was a courtyard fronted by a space of relatively level construction debris, then a small area of flagged stone, and finally the road itself, leading out of the village.

Was it even a village? Or was it just an idle construction site? All that was left of the village in late 2022 was the temple; an ancestral hall; a convenience store (later shut); the village government office; and (we later learned) the Academy, a derelict past-and-possibly-future heritage site off to the east, wedged between desultory agricultural plots and a newly built primary school. Temporary housing had been erected nearby for those of the village's elderly population who wished to remain onsite during the redevelopment process, but most of the villagers now lived elsewhere in the city. Once redevelopment is complete, some of the villagers will move back, into modern flats, but there will not be enough new flats for everyone, and many villagers are surely gone for good. They will take their redevelopment compensation money and make new lives in new places.

The village is one of many that underwent various stages of redevelopment in the final decades of the 1900s, as Guangzhou's rapid expansion swallowed up agricultural communities far beyond the city's historic (formerly walled) heart. Such redeveloped villages came to provide homes for both villagers and internal migrants from elsewhere in China who came to work in Guangzhou's factories and service sector. The more recent wave of village redevelopments has aimed at constructing housing for China's middle class. In 2017, the village was listed as a redevelopment target in city government plans. The following year, a large majority of villagers voted to accept an offer from a developer, which in keeping with similar projects, would provide villagers with temporary accommodation during the construction phase, economic compensation, and (in some cases) new and modernised housing on the site of the old village. The village was demolished in 2020, unfortunately coinciding with the collapse of China's housing market. Although construction work has not completely ceased and seems to be picking up again, progress is slow. A cluster of residential skyscrapers remains part-built and unoccupied in the northeast corner of

the village. Buildings that, in the boom times, would have been completed in months now take years. Most of the village is a wasteland of rubble.

At the time of writing, in early summer 2025, metal sheets have been erected to block off the temple and its courtyard from the village land to the east and west. Yet the temple remains open. Indeed, now that nearly everything else has been demolished, the temple more than ever seems to be the spiritual and cultural heart of the village.

This context would prove significant in our interviews with the temple's two RSPs, which are quoted from in the Results section.

## RESULTS

### Coming to Work at the Village Temple

We began our interview with the junior master by asking how it was that he had first come to the village temple. He explained that he had been born and raised in the small city of Yangjiang in southwest Guangdong Province. After attending university, he had worked at a state-owned enterprise dealing with wastewater treatment, a job that was totally disconnected from his university education in human resources management. He had hoped to find work as a civil servant, but as he puts it, his destiny as part of a family of RSPs intervened:

*Junior Master: Fate has its own plans. After graduating, I originally intended to work around Guangzhou and Foshan. But when I interned, the salary was low, so I went to [the adjacent, lower-cost city of] Dongguan. I never thought about going to Dongguan. I spent two years there. Then I went back to Yangjiang to prepare for the civil service exam, but it didn't go smoothly. Actually, my family had told me that, according to my fate, I couldn't become an official, so it's better to set myself to doing what my family does. So, I came here to do this. ...*

*Pan: You mentioned earlier that your grandfather also worked in this field.*

*Junior Master: Yes, he brought me into this. ... The temple was built in the Qing Dynasty, but there was a special period later (1966–1976), in which a lot of temples across the country suffered damage. Later, the temple was rebuilt [in 1995], and my grandfather was here at that time. He was here before the pandemic in 2019. After 2019, my cousin invited him to Shenzhen because business would be better there. He went there. He told me, "You can do it, and if you don't want to take the civil service exam, you can come here to take my place." That's what he told me. Before he left, I took the civil service exam in 2021. Since I couldn't pass, I decided to come here.*



**Figure 1.** Sketch of the junior master, giving Pan a Bazi reading, 7 April 2024.

Photograph: Adam Grydehøj.

It was the junior master's invitation from his grandfather that brought him to the temple. He reflected, that, like the human resources management in which he had majored at university, being an RSP also involved "dealing with people".

When we subsequently asked about the rest of his family, the extent of the junior master's familial entanglement with religious work became clearer:

*Junior Master: My father also works in this field. My mother takes care of the household more because my father earns enough to support the family, so my mother doesn't need to work outside the home. She does what she likes or takes care of the household. Our family is quite traditional, with the man working outside and the woman taking care of the inside. ... [My sister] prefers to do hands-on things, like arts and crafts. She doesn't like what we do. She finds it a bit mystical. She prefers art. Although everyone grows up in the same family, their interests are different. Girls like beautiful things, which are different from what we do.*

*Pan: Were you interested in this since you were young?*

*Junior Master: When I was young, I was influenced by watching the family elders, my father and grandfather, helping others with this, communicating with customers, so I became interested. I would flip through his books and read. When I was a bit older, he told me that, according to my fate, this profession suits me well, so I didn't feel averse to it. I learned it. From junior high school to university*

*graduation, about a decade. When he told me to change careers, I immediately did. I was able to start doing this immediately.*

At no point during the interview does the junior master mention that the other RSP at the temple, Master Zhang, is in fact his father, something that we learned only later. He instead discusses his RSP work in a professional manner:

*Pan: When you came here in 2022, were you immediately on your own because your grandfather had already gone [to Shenzhen], or did you have an apprenticeship? Did you start working here alone?*

*Junior Master: Yes, there's a senior master [who works] across from me [in the temple]. He would introduce me sometimes. When he's too busy, he would tell other customers they don't have to wait for him, they can find the handsome guy over there, which is me. That's okay too, because he was also taught by the previous master.*

*Pan: When did he come here? ...*

*Junior Master: I believe he came in 2017. ... He's been here since then. There are usually two masters. For when one goes out to help others with feng shui or mountain graves. We Chinese have two big events: buying a house and burying ancestors. Sometimes he's called out, and I can take care of the temple here because people come to worship every day. You open the door in the morning and keep it open until you leave work in the evening. That's usually how it goes. If there's only one master here, and he's out, he has to close the door, which might be a bit awkward sometimes, so it's convenient to have two people.*

*Pan: Besides these matters, do you also handle daily affairs here?*

*Junior Master: We just take care of things, like sweeping the floor, wiping the tables when there's nothing else to do, minor issues.*

When we later interview Master Zhang, we also ask him how he came to the village temple. He explains that he came to replace two fellow villagers of his who had been working at the temple but are now over 80 years old. Prior to that, he had had other work back in Yangjiang:

*Master Zhang: Before I turned 40, I was farming back home, doing all kinds of work. ... And using the knowledge related to this field [of ritual services].*

Pan: *But it wasn't your main occupation?*

Master Zhang: *That's right, because back then, the children back home still needed to go to school, and there was a lot of pressure. Doing this [RSP work] wasn't really that profitable. Now that I'm older, and the children have grown up and entered society, I just earn a little bit for living expenses, that's all. ...*

Pan: *Was it your fellow villager who directly introduced you to come here?*

Master Zhang: *Yes, my fellow villager recommended me. Otherwise, we wouldn't have come. The locals here don't like outsiders coming in, partly because they worry you won't do the job right, and partly because they fear you'll overcharge.*

Not all RSPs believe that skills in ritual services need to be passed down through families, but Master Zhang feels strongly on this point, to which he returns on a number of occasions in our interview and our subsequent encounters. Master Zhang learned about feng shui from his grandfather, who had learned it from his own father. It is in this context that Master Zhang first mentions that the junior master is his son, which shifts our line of questioning:

Pan: *So before, it was your father working here?*

Master Zhang: *My father-in-law.*

Pan: *[The junior master's] grandfather? So you, Master, learned from your father, but it was just a coincidence that your wife's father also knew this? ...*

Master Zhang: *That's right. After we got to know each other, because you see, a lot of this knowledge can't be passed outside the family, so I learned a lot from him as well.*

Master Zhang confirms that his son has learned the ritual skills of both his father's and his mother's families. He emphasises the difficult and time-consuming nature of learning to be an RSP: "In our line of work, you have to be attentive. If you like to go out and have fun, it won't work." Master Zhang himself began training under his great-grandfather at the age of 13 and would occasionally do casual readings for classmates, friends and relatives. One's reputation as an RSP is built up over time.



Master Zhang: *If you're good at [providing ritual services], they'll call you to do it. If you're not good, you can't do it sloppily. You have to be able to do it well. For example, his (the junior master's) mother called him to come to Guangzhou to find a job. He submitted several applications, but the jobs were all in other cities, and he didn't want to go, so now he's doing this. His grandfather doesn't come back here often, so he handles his grandfather's customers. ...*

Pan: *Did he quit his previous job because of the travel, or what?*

Master Zhang: *Constant travel. The company sent him on business trips, so he had to move around a lot. He didn't like it, so he quit. Now he earns a little living expense here. The most urgent thing now is to find a girlfriend. He came to Guangzhou because all the girls in our hometown have left to find jobs. Our hometown is poor and backward. ... He came out here, one, to find a job, and two, to find a girlfriend because the family already has a house and a car. ... He was born during the strictest period of the family planning policy, in the '90s. Back then, people back home didn't want girls; everyone wanted boys. So now there are more men than women, and it's difficult to find a girlfriend in our hometown. It's hard, very hard, especially as he's getting older, and our generation is different.*

### A Changing Village and Official Environment

This is very much a village temple, but its lack of a village has a strong effect on the RSPs' lives. In return for maintaining the temple and officiating at festivals, the temple's RSPs were formerly provided with free housing in dormitories beside the temple, but these were demolished as part of the village redevelopment, so they now live in rented housing in the adjacent village.

The loss of free housing occurred alongside the dwindling of the RSPs' customer base. Master Zhang explains how village redevelopment and wider economic trends have affected work in the temple:

Master Zhang: *It's very different from now. Now the economy is declining somewhat, and with houses being so expensive, you can't build your own home anymore. So our business is very slow, much less than before.*

Pan: *Back then, many people were building houses, so they often needed feng shui consultations?*

Master Zhang: *Yes, feng shui consultations and choosing auspicious dates were more common. Now there isn't as much work because the government doesn't allow self-built houses anymore; everything has to be fully furnished and decorated. ... Some villagers were building, but after the village was marked for demolition, no one built anymore. ... The villagers had to rent houses outside because the entire village was slated for demolition. So they had to move out and rent houses, including us. We rent outside now too. We used to have rooms here.*

Pan: *So because they moved far away, they don't come here as often?*

Master Zhang: *They still come. On the first and fifteenth of the lunar month, they come. If there's a family celebration, people will return to the temple to pray. Villagers always come back to pray. It's a local tradition. If there's a big celebration, they'll come back here to pray to the gods and ask for blessings.*

Pan: *So the feng shui business has decreased, but other services are still in demand?*

Master Zhang: *Everything has decreased. How to put it – fewer people are getting married these days, so fewer children are being born, right? And you can't just build houses. For ordinary people, it's difficult to afford a house. How can we afford it when it's so expensive, tens of thousands [of yuan] per square meter?*

Pan: *What about funerals? The elderly are still healthy. Do you prefer how things were before, or how they are now – maybe it's quieter now?*

Master Zhang: *It doesn't matter if it's quieter. The most important thing is that we came here from hundreds of kilometres away just to earn a bit more for our living expenses. To be honest, that's the truth, right?*

Pan: *So you preferred it when it was busier, with more people?*

Master Zhang: *Of course, there was more work back then.*

Pan: *Now it seems like there's hardly anyone?*

Master Zhang: *That's why we used to charge less, but now we have to charge more. There isn't as much work now. If you don't raise your*

*prices a bit, you won't be able to make a living here. Soon, you won't even be able to pay the rent. How could I continue being a master here, right? Some villagers say it's more expensive now. I don't want to raise prices, but if there were a free place for me to live, I wouldn't need to raise prices. I'd charge the old rates without any problem. But there's no choice because you have to rent a place, pay for water and electricity and everything. Now I have to pay for it myself, unlike before when I didn't have to pay.*

We have indeed heard villagers and others complain that the RSPs' prices are too high, but perceptions of appropriate prices are relative, and many other RSPs (for instance, those living in more expensive neighbourhoods) routinely charge much more. In our observations, as of early summer 2025, the typical price for a full Bazi reading (30–60 minutes) is 100 yuan, with the less time-consuming follow-up Bazi readings and kau cim oracle interpretations costing less. Some (but not all) individuals are offered paper talismans (which can be placed in one's phone case and thus carried around everywhere) for good luck, to ward off ill fortune, or for other purposes, at a price of 50 yuan. Customers who purchase incense are told to pay *suiyi* ('what you want'). Consecration of deity statues costs 260 yuan, and consecration of a zodiac animal statue costs 100 yuan.

When we speak with the junior master about these topics, his perceptions differ somewhat, partly because he first came to the temple after the village had already been demolished. We ask how it feels to work in such a desolate place, surrounded by ruins and construction:

*Junior Master: It doesn't feel like anything, just quieter. If you're not used to it, you might feel a bit nervous being alone at night, but we don't feel that. Before I came here, another master told me that sometimes villagers would sleep here, so we're not afraid.*

**Pan:** *Do villagers still come here regularly?*

*Junior Master: Not as much, because everyone has moved out. Before, there were a lot of people here, many came to sit and play. It will get better after resettlement. More people will come. ... I prefer the quiet atmosphere. You have to endure loneliness in this profession because once you open the door, you can't leave. You sit here all day, and when it gets dark, and you confirm that no one's coming, you lock up and go to sleep. Actually, in this profession, you wait patiently for people to come.*

The junior master has thought deeply about how and why people develop a need to use the services of RSPs. When we ask what kinds of people come to the temple for help, he replies:

*People won't believe in these things when they're young, and they rarely go to worship. But at some point, they suddenly start believing in fate. ... Some people, after going through a rough patch, they hear from friends that a certain temple is very effective, so they come to pray for blessings and hope for smoother days. When they feel troubled, they come here to pray. Sometimes, when they have major decisions to make, like switching jobs, which is very important for young people, sometimes they're unsure whether it's good or bad. They come here to seek advice, ask for divination, or have their fortune told, just to get some suggestions so it will be easier to make a decision. ... Of course, we also charge a certain fee. There's no need to talk about it so nobly because it's mutually beneficial for us too. ... When an elderly person passes away, we help write huangbang (the funeral announcement scrolls), specifying the time of death, auspicious and inauspicious dates, age, etc. I've done all of that. We cover the full cycle of life: birth, aging, illness, and death, but we don't engage in anything illegal.*

The junior master's emphasis on only engaging in legal activities is important, for temples and religious rituals are alternately promoted, tolerated and condemned by the state, which is in some circumstances inclined to treat religious traditions as intangible cultural heritage but in other circumstances sees it as a vulgar custom or threat to social stability. The line between what is and is not permissible is often unclear, and temple-based RSPs try to avoid drawing unwanted attention. During a visit to the temple in mid-May 2025, we noted that the RSPs' QR codes, which are used to receive digital payments, had been moved from their places beneath the glass on the tabletops to a desk drawer. This renders payment more difficult, or impossible in cases in which a worshipper stops by to burn incense or give an offering while the RSP is out and cannot find a means of paying. When we asked Master Zhang why they had moved the QR codes, he replied that it is because their work "cannot be commercialised" – a notion that runs counter to the very idea of professional ritual services.

Crucially, the laws surrounding ritual services in temples are (perhaps intentionally) ambiguous. The State Administration of Religious Affairs (2023) specifies that no organisation or individual may conduct commercial promotion or seek illegal profits in the name of, or using the influence of, a place of religious activities, including *minjian xinyang huodong changsuo* ('places of folk belief activity'), a category that encompasses village temples that are not

registered with the Chinese Daoist Association. For its part, the Guangdong Provincial Ethnic and Religious Affairs Commission (2021) notes the need for stronger administrative measures to guard against “the commercialization of folk beliefs and lawless elements using folk beliefs to defraud money” at sites of folk religious worship. Although fortune-telling, oracle reading, feng shui, and the other common activities undertaken by the RSPs in this study are not mentioned among the banned or worrisome activities, village temple-based RSPs seem to operate in a stricter regulatory environment than do RSPs who provide similar services outside of temples, for instance online or from a stall on the street.

The RSPs in this study express flexibility concerning how to undertake rituals and give and receive offerings in today’s China. For example, Master Zhang discusses the care that customers and RSPs must take to adhere to state guidelines, even when officially encouraged concerning religious traditions, such as those connected with the sea goddess Mazu:

Master Zhang: *In the past, people used to do things carelessly, but not anymore. The state doesn’t allow them to do that anymore. ...*

Pan: *But now they’re saying we should promote traditional culture, aren’t they?*

Master Zhang: *Yes, traditional culture. But the state promotes Marxism-Leninism, doesn’t it? It doesn’t promote figures like [the Daoist master] Zhang Daoling or the Buddha, does it? The state has regulations now. Civil servants aren’t allowed to come to temples to pray.*

Pan: *But isn’t Mazu still very popular?*

Master Zhang: *Mazu is popular among the common people, but in official circles, it’s not allowed. ... Civil servants aren’t allowed to go to temples to worship gods. I think I saw a video on Douyin (the Chinese TikTok) the other day saying that civil servants can’t go to temples to pray.*

Pan: *What if they want to pray for blessings for their children?*

Master Zhang: *Their wives or children, who aren’t civil servants, might go instead, indirectly on their behalf. The civil servant himself doesn’t go, but that doesn’t mean he doesn’t understand or respect the practice, right?*

Pan: *Will the god understand that?*

Master Zhang: *Yes. As long as the god receives incense offerings, it doesn't matter who brings them. What matters is the sincerity of the person praying.*

This discussion illustrates not just how both RSPs and customers adapt to changing rules and guidelines but also how they deal with uncertainty surrounding these rules and guidelines. Because it is not always clear what is and is not permissible, and because people rely on social media and other informal sources of information, the activities of providing ritual services and worshipping inevitably involve gently testing boundaries to determine their limits. The gods, too, exhibit this flexibility, receiving incense from civil servants who have made the offering indirectly.

### Learning and Areas of Professional Practice

The masters tell us that customers come to the temple for feng shui; Bazi readings; writing memorial scrolls when people have died; consecrations; praying to and asking advice from the gods; and choosing auspicious dates (for marriage, constructing a house, giving birth, etc). Feng shui work involves going out and visiting houses, both *yang* residences (homes for the living) and *yin* residences (homes for the dead, tombs), including mountain tombs.

The junior master describes different kinds of ritual services that can be undertaken when someone dies and notes the division of labour and specialisms among RSPs:

Junior Master: *We make it very clear. We do this, but we don't do that. This we can do, but that we don't do, mainly because we don't have time to do that. We'd be away from home all year round; it's extremely busy. ... [Master Zhang does feng shui work.] If people want him to provide a service at their home, he'll help them pick an auspicious location. Like which cemetery to bury their family member, which spot would be better. We do that, and we can also choose an auspicious date for the burial, so you know when it's better to bury them. That's our scope of work. However, we don't chant scriptures for them—our specialisations are more finely divided, so it's different. Of course, we could do that, but personally, I feel if we took on that work, we wouldn't have time to stay here and focus on what we do now.*

Pan: *What about age groups? Are there more people of a certain age group coming here? Or is it irregular?*



Junior Master: *There's a bit of a pattern. In our Chinese tradition, men tend to be more laid-back about life – whether things go well or poorly, they often just go with the flow. Women, however, have keener perceptual acuity. When they feel life isn't going smoothly, they're more likely to seek us out for guidance. That's why most of our customers are aunts or older. They've seen and experienced more in life, so they tend to believe more in concepts like fate. Having witnessed various ups and downs, they inherently trust that there's some predestined order to things.*

Pan: *Is it usually around 40? Or 35?*

Junior Master: *A bit over 40. Also, there might be an influence from the internet because our profession is also promoted on the internet. Although we don't advertise, the profession is promoted online, and many young people know about it. They come to inquire, suddenly wanting to calculate something. They come to see about their marriage because young people mainly care about three things: wealth, career, and marriage. It's basically these three things.*

We also ask the junior master about the process of becoming an RSP, at this point unaware that his father also works as an RSP in the temple. He describes years of learning and practice, as well as oversight from a master, but he does not describe a set framework of apprenticeship. The junior master's grandfather began by teaching him the basics, instructing him on “which books to read, what to memorise. Then he comes to check on you, and when you're proficient enough, he'll give you some customers to practice with, ones he's already read for”. It takes around ten years of practice to become good enough to begin working independently.

In the junior master's pragmatic account, one becomes an RSP through learning and practice: different RSPs take different approaches and focus on different methods and techniques, developing their own specialties. Although Master Zhang also approaches the different specialties pragmatically, he continually emphasises familial inheritance of knowledge. Over the course of many discussions, we ask Master Zhang about different techniques, some of which he treats with respect but claims to have no expertise in, some of which he believes are ethically dubious but might possibly be effective, and others of which he is mildly or strongly dismissive in terms of their efficacy.

Master Zhang started learning ritual skills at the age of 13 and began providing services on his own six or seven years later.

Master Zhang: *You can't expect to learn everything quickly. There are many aspects to this field, and the knowledge used in different*

*areas is different. It's not a one-size-fits-all approach, right? For Bazi readings, you need knowledge about destiny; for feng shui, you need feng shui knowledge; for physiognomy, you need knowledge of face reading. ... In our area, most families deal with feng shui. [The junior master's] grandfather's side also does physiognomy and feng shui. ... In our family, we only learned feng shui. After I married my wife, I learned about fortune-telling and other knowledge from her family.*

In keeping with his conviction that RSP skills must be inherited, Master Zhang emphasises oral communication of tradition. When we ask whether he learned from books as well as from his great-grandfather's own words, he replies:

*Most of it was taught orally, but some basic knowledge is similar to what you can find in books today. But it's not the same. A lot of books on feng shui and geomancy are available now, but they're just theoretical and not very practical. ... That's why few people can really learn it.*



**Figure 2.** Master Zhang's geomantic compass, 14 August 2024.

**Photograph:** Adam Grydehøj.

We have seen the RSPs refer to printed, mass-produced books when performing Bazi readings and divination, and Master Zhang says that some handwritten books, copied out from other sources, are passed down within families. For feng shui, Master Zhang uses a special geomantic compass, the *luopan* (a traditional Chinese tool used in *feng shui* practice), which takes at least five years to learn, “like studying at university”. Although Master Zhang feels that learning only gains meaning through practice, he also stresses the need to keep learning and keep studying. These RSPs seem to occupy a middle category between Li Geng’s (2019) division of diviners into those who possess ‘social wisdom’ and those who rely on ‘book knowledge’.

## ANALYSING SOCIOECONOMIC FORCES IN RITUAL SERVICE WORK

It is common for temple RSPs to come from other cities. Although RSPs play crucial roles in the ritual life of the community, none of the Guangdong village temple RSPs we have interviewed in our wider study originated in or hold particularly high social status in the community they serve.

The village in which the temple in the current study is located has undergone rapid and physically devastating change in the past years. China’s urbanisation and transition into a developed economy following the start of the Reform and Opening Up era in the late 1970s prompted waves of development and redevelopment on the outskirts of Guangzhou. Incomes, education, quality of life, health, environmental conditions and many other factors have vastly improved throughout much of Guangdong. The demolition and housing market collapse in the early 2020s has, however, left the village in a state of deconstruction, with the community of villagers scattered and mainly living elsewhere. This has profoundly affected the RSP business.

Once a temple at the centre of a thriving, densely populated village, the temple has lost its local community of worshippers. This makes the post-demolition drop in business reported by the RSPs concerning in terms of the continuity of village tradition and the maintenance of faith in the temple’s highly localised deity. In a study from Zhejiang, Zhao (2019) finds that village demolition helped transform a temple into a centre of community identity. This seems not to have occurred in the village in the present study, perhaps partly because the nearby temporary housing area for elderly villagers has become the new post-demolition site for community continuity.

Master Zhang is earnest about the religious and ritual aspects of his work, but he is nevertheless upfront about it being *work*. If such work becomes unviable in this temple, he and his son will presumably relocate to somewhere with more customers. Yet the same national economic difficulties that caused delays to the village’s redevelopment and thereby the stark reduction in ritual service customers are also gradually contributing to an increase in customers from outside the village. In conversations in the first half of 2025, Master

Zhang noted that the slowing Chinese economy was prompting more financial concerns among the public and that more people were coming to receive Bazi readings and seek advice as a result. This aligns with the junior master's sense that people – especially young women – seek help from RSPs when they are confronted with challenges in life. Other scholars have likewise shown how socioeconomic and spatial change can alter the ways and spaces in which religious traditions are practiced, as well as the people who practice them (Law 2025; Johnson 2024; Hayward 2024; Karlach 2023a).

These demand-side factors in the temple economy are complemented by supply-side factors. Master Zhang gave up his work as a yam farmer in Yangjiang and moved to Guangzhou to work at the temple only once his children had started earning incomes of their own, and the lower-paid but more enjoyable or intellectually rewarding knowledge work became feasible within the family finances. The increasingly competitive Chinese labour market for university graduates prevented the junior master from achieving his own career goals. At the same time, the urban-rural divide in China's demographic, educational and economic outcomes (a general predominance of men over women, particularly in rural areas, and an exodus of educated women to the larger cities) meant there was a lack of suitable marriage partners for the junior master back in Yangjiang.

In Master Zhang's telling, the (now-married) junior master came to work at the temple in Guangzhou because of a deficit of both job opportunities and women in his hometown, with the junior master's mother having been instrumental in sending him to the temple in Guangzhou to find a wife. The junior master's own narrative excludes the marriage motivation, but it does dwell upon the role of the economy in determining his movement through space: He had felt compelled to live in the lower-cost city of Dongguan due to poor earning power. The junior master emphasises his grandfather's message that it is his fate to work as a temple RSP. Migration and homemaking processes, as well as the motivations behind them and emotions imbued within them, have a major influence on the possibility for traditions to be transmitted across space and generations (Podgorelec & Grydehøj & Klempić Bogadi 2024; Lindsay-Latimer et al. 2024).

The Chinese state is not opposed to the existence of village temples and the maintenance of religious traditions. RSPs and their clients strive to stay within boundaries set by the officially atheist political system, but Chinese governments at all levels (national, provincial, city, district, town and village) at times construct policies that actively encourage certain religious traditions that can, through heritagisation processes, be seen to embody the Chinese nation or simply to offer the potential for making money (Thurston 2024; Chan 2005; Zhu 2025, 2024).

Professionalisation exists in difficult relation with regulatory and market pressures. The RSPs in our study occupy a role of semi-marketisation. On the



one hand, their need to cover living expenses has prompted them to raise the prices of knowledge-based ritual services as the customer flow has decreased. On the other hand, the RSPs still maintain a kind of low-profit spiritual economy model, especially for ritual services directly related to the temple's operations, such as the sale of incense at a 'pay what you want' rate.

Li (2019) stresses the importance of specialisation in the marketisation of ritual services and the professionalisation of the RSP role. The two RSPs in our study inhabit an in-between space. They have entered the religious market, and they emphasise their professional character, but they do not engage in aggressive marketing or open competition with other RSPs. Among the Guangdong RSPs we have encountered in our wider study, they are nearly unique in not actively advertising or posting about their services on social media (for instance, WeChat Moments, RedNote, or Douyin). When they speak disparagingly about their peers, they do so only in the sense that they criticise what they see as some individuals' unprofessional practice; they do not claim more general superiority. Our observations and conversations suggest that their business remains reliant on word-of-mouth marketing, on attracting customers through the 'efficacy' (*ling li*) of their services. The RSPs may be motivated to keep prices low because of the perception that a balance must be maintained between emotional sincerity, material donations/payments and the efficacy of the sacred (Yang & Wu 2019).

## PROFESSIONALISM, PRACTICE, AND THE MAINTENANCE OF TRADITION

Beyond the difficult and time-consuming activity of learning religious traditions and keeping up-to-date with new knowledge on the subject, RSPs navigate these diverse social, economic and political currents. All this is effortful. As Thurston (2024) writes, "Treating transmission as work recognizes that this interaction and the traditions that develop from it takes effort. Traditions take work to perform, transmit, and preserve. ... None of it reaches the present without the dedicated efforts of individuals and communities."

The effortful and inventive maintenance of tradition across rural and urban space requires considerable work from tradition bearers (Hu 2024). The RSPs' locally situated ritual services, so essential to the continuance of the village as a community, fit with the notion that places and cultures are laboriously constructed in tandem, as people take locations and work them into something new and meaningful (Lange 2024; Basso 1996). Yet this single village temple is a site of multiple, interacting meanings (Nadarajah & Grydehøj 2024), holding a different significance and encompassing different sets of traditional behaviour, formed through practice, for villagers who worship there, for outsiders who come for Bazi readings, and for the RSPs themselves.

In many villages, the professionalisation of RSP work (the receiving and servicing of customers, the taking of payments) is what makes communal

religious life possible. People can (and do) turn to AI for Bazi readings, but AI will not clean the temple, keep its doors open, keep it stocked with incense, and officiate at festivals. Nor can village volunteers necessarily be relied upon for this. The adjacent village to our study site also has a temple, but being reliant on volunteers, it is open only a few hours each day, and even then, unreliably. This matches our experiences visiting village temples elsewhere in Guangzhou and Guangdong, where we find that temples without RSPs or other professional caretakers are much more likely to be in poor condition and to be fully or partly inaccessible. If maintenance of tradition is hard work, it should not be surprising for this work to be paid. The ability of the RSPs to work is closely linked to the ability of the temple to function.

Yet as noted earlier, it is common for both scholars and others to regard money and payment as existing in tension with religion and the sacred. In his excellent study of artisans who create ritual whips in Taiwan, Reich (2024: 220–221) notes on numerous occasions that his contributors regard their ritual services “as a calling, a service to the gods, not as a primary source of income”. All of Reich’s contributors perform other, non-ritual labour as their main profession, but the academic discussion of the ritual labour glides (perhaps unintentionally) toward the sense that RSP work is more spiritually valuable when money is not an important motivator.

RSPs may be especially susceptible to being regarded as inappropriately materialistic because they are responsible for setting their own prices and negotiating directly with customers. The increasing institutionalisation of economic processes in much of society more broadly makes such RSPs stand out. The RSPs at this village temple are the only individuals with whom the authors of this paper regularly have informal economic interactions: paying for services for which there is no price list, never quite knowing where sociality ends and ritual service work begins.

Crucially, although the two RSPs in this study are at pains to point out that being an RSP is a job, their narratives also make clear that it is a job they have chosen because they enjoy doing it, it is relaxing, they feel especially capable of doing it because of their familial inheritance, and (in the case of the junior master) they are fated to do it. Master Zhang was formerly a yam farmer, while the junior master had a tiring job in wastewater management that required constant travel. Both had casually undertaken occasional RSP work in the past, but by becoming full-time professionals, they have been able to improve their quality of life even though they earn less money than they did in the past.

Master Zhang, who emphasises the importance of inherited knowledge and hard work, is critical of those who act as professional RSPs while practicing their work in an *xueyi bujing* (“incompetent” or poorly trained) manner, who have attended classes but have failed to learn *zhen benshi* (“authentic skills”). For him, there is a difference between being a professional RSP and



acting professionally, between providing services and maintaining tradition and sacred knowledge.

## CONCLUSION

The scholarly and to some extent popular desire to separate culture, heritage, tradition, religion and the sacred from money and from wider socioeconomic processes does not always reflect the lived realities of either customers or ritual service providers (RSPs). Community religious life depends on individuals who work to maintain traditions as well as to maintain material culture. Professional RSPs are able to commit more time, energy and resources to such maintenance than are most nonprofessional RSPs.

However, even such professionals are impacted by wider social, economic and political forces. As this study has shown, national, provincial and local economies can impact RSPs' customer base and the spatial context for their work in complex ways. The context for Chinese RSP work and religious life is changing, and so too are Chinese religious traditions. RSPs play an important role in maintaining tradition and in innovating it in response to these changes. At the same time, political and regulatory environments set boundaries for what kinds of religious activities are possible or advisable – in a distinctive way in the Chinese context, in which the regulatory system maintains a space of ambiguity in which RSPs and their customers must manoeuvre with care.

Our occupational folklore approach has illustrated the importance of considering work, money and profession when studying religious culture. Although it is possible to undertake a study of Chinese village temple RSPs' ritual practices and sacred knowledges without attending to or acknowledging their professional status and livelihoods, the resultant understanding of local religion and tradition would be incomplete. RSPs' repertoires of ritual services are determined in part by the wider religious market, by what customers are willing to pay for and by the efficacy with which they can provide certain services relative to that of other providers. This is the case even for those such as the RSPs in this study who are only semi-marketised. Equally, this paper has shown how the study of religious folklore can shed light on the ways in which local culture is influenced by wider political, economic and spatial trends and practices.

These findings are relevant outside China as well, for ritual service provision (broadly defined) is critical to the maintenance, communication and development of tradition in many different settings, even beyond straightforwardly religious contexts. For example, in Europe, contestations over the professionalisation of traditional storytelling and the abiding tensions between tradition and innovation within 'folk music' may be areas in which an occupational folklore approach and attentiveness to the multifaceted nature of ritual in the construction of community can shed light on how tradition is and is not performed.

With its focus on a single village temple and two particular individuals, this paper can only illustrate some of the ways in which work, money and religion interact in today's China; it cannot provide a full account of professional practices among RSPs. More research is needed into religious occupations in China (including more detailed accounts of the working lives of individual RSPs) and the ways in which customers perceive the professional roles of those who provide ritual services.

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# “I Thank Folklore for Everything”: On the Anniversary of the Udmurt Folklorist Galina Glukhova

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**Abstract:** The article is dedicated to Galina Glukhova, a prominent Udmurt folklorist and researcher. It highlights her significant contribution to the study of Udmurt folklore and traditional culture. The author emphasizes Galina's role as a dedicated scientist and educator, focusing on her extensive field research and numerous scientific publications. Special attention is paid to the researcher's work on the study of mummery, calendar ceremonies and ritual attributes of the Udmurts. The article also examines Galina's personal traits that help to build excellent working relationships with colleagues and students.

**Keywords:** Galina Glukhova, folklorist, the Udmurts, traditional culture, field research, scientific publications, mummery, calendar ceremonies, ritual attributes

The name of Galina Glukhova, a Candidate of Philological Sciences, a Distinguished Educator of the Udmurt Republic, the Head of the Institute of Udmurt Philology, Finno-Ugric Studies and Journalism at the Udmurt State University, and an Associate Professor in the Department of Udmurt Literature and the

Literature of the Peoples of Russia, has gained a strong reputation in the Udmurt folklore community.

Galina Glukhova was born on January 28, 1965, in the village of Kvaser, Kezsky District, northeastern Udmurtia. After graduating from Kez Secondary School in 1982, she entered the Udmurt department of the Faculty of Philology at the Udmurt State University.

During her studies, Galina demonstrated a keen interest in the cultural heritage of the Udmurts, and her thesis, "The Image of Lopsho Pedun in Udmurt Social and Everyday Tales", was supervised by Daniil Yashin, a distinguished scholar of Udmurt folklore. Through his guidance she developed her fieldwork skills and gained valuable experience.

In 1988, Galina returned to the Faculty of Philology at Udmurt University as an assistant at the Department of Udmurt Literature and Literature of the Peoples of the USSR. As a lecturer in Folkloristics she needed a deep knowledge of traditional culture, and there is a particular situation that she likes sharing that shaped her career. One day, after a seminar with students, Galina met Tatiana Vladykina, a Professor of Folklore Studies, and asked her the question, why paremias were classified as minor genres of folklore when they contained such deep folk wisdom. Tatiana suggested that if Galina joined her graduate school, she would find the answers to all her questions.

In 1994, Galina entered the postgraduate program at the Udmurt Research Institute under the supervision of Tatyana Vladykina. The Professor's personal example of respect for the word and symbol inspired Galina and her fellow students to pursue their goals. Tatyana taught them to analyze materials, seek confirmation from various sources, double-check all data, highlight significant aspects, and consider materials from different perspectives. Along with high expectations for both individuals and their work, Tatyana consistently provided encouragement and support. She was always prepared to assist, mentor and guide students. It was essential for her that students fully understand the material and appreciate the significance of their research.

Galina was a highly responsible and hardworking student. She had analyzed numerous theoretical books and articles and worked with various archives. During her visit to Tartu in 1995, she had the opportunity to explore the extensive folklore collection at the Estonian Literary Museum, attend lectures at the University of Tartu and work in the academic library. These experiences had a significant impact on Galina and contributed greatly to her personal growth. She also paid special attention to field expeditions, which were considered a valuable source of information.

The results of her meticulous work were summarized in her thesis, "The Symbolism of Mummery in Udmurt Traditional Culture", which she successfully defended in 2002. The work offered a fresh and comprehensive perspective on Udmurt mummery as a multifaceted cultural phenomenon. It examines mummery within the context of calendar and family rituals as an intricately



interconnected system that is deeply rooted in the traditional worldview of the Udmurt people. The terminology of mummery is organized into a linguistic map of the Udmurt world that elucidates the relationships between various ritual practices and their verbal expressions. Furthermore, the thesis delves into the dynamics of various ritual codes. The significance of the work is marked by the materials Galina personally collected during numerous field expeditions. The firsthand data provides valuable insights into the living traditions of Udmurt mummery.

Over the years, Galina's research has significantly expanded and today covers a wide range of aspects of the Udmurt traditional culture. An analysis of publications from the last decade reveals that most of the researcher's works focus on calendar rituals and various aspects related to this topic. Her work has been enriched through collaborations with other Udmurt scholars, such as Tatyana Vladykina, Tatyana Panina, Nikolay Anisimov and others.

Collaborative work with Professor Tatyana Vladykina has been a significant part of Galina's academic journey. She has not only served as the supervisor of her scientific research, but also as a close colleague and friend. Together, they have conducted extensive research on various topics related to Udmurt traditional culture.

One of their most notable contributions to the field is the publication of their monograph "The Cycle of the Year" in 2011. This work explores the concept of time in Udmurt culture through the lens of the traditional calendar rituals, presenting a comprehensive analysis of the findings.

The uniqueness of this work lies in its first attempt to systematize Udmurt ritual culture. It incorporates features of ethnodialectical, mythological, linguistic and folklore dictionaries. The scope of this work is impressive, with over 500 terms and definitions identified and explained from more than 200 different materials, including archival and published sources.

The article "The Udmurt National Calendar and Rural Society" (2017), co-authored with Tatyana Vladykina and Tatyana Panina provides a comprehensive analysis of the relationship between calendar traditions and the social structures of rural Udmurt communities.

Some works are devoted to the study of ritual objects. These include "Subject Realities of Calendar Rituals: Headdress" (2021, co-authored with Tatyana Vladykina) and "Chuk/Tug in Everyday and Ritual Contexts" (2021, co-authored with Tatyana Vladykina and Tatyana Panina). The latter paper explores multifunctional aspects of a significant cultural artifact known as 'chuk' (southern dialect) or 'tug' (northern dialect) in both the everyday life and ritual practices of the Udmurts. This artifact manifests itself in various forms such as red silk thread, bundles of multicolored threads, fringes, ribbons, and other textiles including rags, towels, coverlets, and shawls. Such objects hold cultural significance and are essential for understanding Udmurt ethnoculture.

Furthermore, Galina Glukhova and Tatyana Vladykina have collaborated on studies of gender and age stratification in Udmurt society, as seen in their

work “Gender and Age Stratification of Village Society in the Udmurt Calendar” (2015). The article explores Shrovetide and winter mummers in the context of socialization, with a focus on the gender and age-related aspects of participants. This is seen as a form of regulation within the ritual framework. The research also identifies key motifs and characters that served as symbols of qualitative transformations in the natural cycle and human existence. Particular emphasis is placed on the roles of these characters and the distinctive aspects of their behavior.

The impact of contemporary realities on the traditional Udmurt culture has been the subject of the research “Traditional Udmurt Culture and Modern Challenges in the Context of COVID-19” (2021, co-authored with Nikolay Anisimov). The work examines how the pandemic has affected traditional ceremonies and social practices. It also emphasizes the resilience of Udmurt traditional culture, demonstrating its ability to adapt to the unforeseen challenges posed by COVID-19 while preserving its essential cultural components through innovative approaches.

Today, Galina continues to explore a wide range of research interests. One of her areas of focus is the role of mummers in various rituals, with a particular emphasis on its significance within the Udmurt traditional wedding. Her article, “Mummers in the Udmurt Wedding System” (Glukhova 2024a), offers an in-depth examination of this topic. The article explores how mummers has evolved from its original serious ritual role to more playful and entertaining forms, mirroring broader changes in Udmurt wedding traditions. While many traditional aspects of the ritual have lost their symbolic significance, they continue to play a significant role as a source of entertainment and cultural continuity in contemporary Udmurt weddings. This study emphasizes the importance of finding a balance between preserving traditional practices and adapting them to modern society.

Another recent article published in 2024, “The Mythological Character *Chokmor* in the Traditional Worldview of the Udmurts,” explores the etymology of this term based on linguistic data and ritual practices within the Udmurt community. The article analyzes the use of the term “chokmor” or “chokmorskön” in both southern and northern Udmurt traditions during winter and spring/summer ceremonies (Glukhova 2024b).

The study of “chokmor” within the traditional Udmurt worldview suggests a possible origin from the term “chek” or “cheke,” and its use in rituals as a symbol of communication with the supernatural realm. During spring and winter festivals, it may represent the spirit of a deceased ancestor who appears in the form of a masked character. The author analyzes the symbolism, terminology and local features of this phenomenon in various ritual contexts, including calendar, family and occasional rituals. She draws conclusions about the magical nature of ritual disguise, which was associated with both the cult of ancestors and the fertility of earth, livestock and family well-being.

In total, Galina Glukhova has published more than 200 papers in highly respected journals and collective volumes. Her work is distinguished by its thorough study and analysis of folkloric texts, as well as the comparison and identification of patterns across various local traditions. She also examines the relationship between verbal texts and ritual contexts, contributing to an understanding of the most ancient layers of traditional culture.

Moreover, Galina's work has been widely recognized by foreign scholars, particularly by her Estonian colleagues with whom she maintains warm and productive relationships. From 1995 to 2022, she regularly participated in internships at the Estonian Literary Museum in Tartu.

From the very beginning of her career, Galina has successfully combined scientific work with a teaching career. She has a portfolio of various original educational and methodological materials, which she uses in her classes. At the moment, Galina teaches courses on Udmurt and Russian folklore, Finno-Ugric mythology and culture, current issues in the field of folklore studies, journalism in ethnic and cultural interaction and other related subjects.

Galina is a talented teacher who not only shares knowledge but also inspires her students to pursue scholarship. She strives to instill in her students a passion for research and practical work. Her efforts have resulted in more than three hundred successful graduates who have defended their diplomas. Many of her students have gone on to become successful teachers, researchers, editors and experts in education and culture.

Students appreciate her unique ability to find an approach to each student and inspire their interest in the subject. She is one of the few teachers in Udmurtia who engages her students to conduct research on traditional Udmurt culture, inspiring them to explore and learn about their heritage.

Due to her rigorous, fair and friendly approach, students choose Galina as their mentor and supervisor. Her sense of humor and communication skills help her maintain friendly relationships with students over many years. She serves as a role model for aspiring scholars, inspiring them with her dedication to teaching and her passion for education.

Galina Glukhova is an experienced teacher who successfully combines teaching and administrative duties at the institute. She began her managerial career as the Deputy Director for Academic Affairs at the Institute of Udmurt Philology, Finno-Ugric Studies and Journalism, and now holds the position of Director.

Colleagues appreciate her for her dedication, responsibility and ability to communicate effectively with people. She easily establishes contacts with both students and colleagues, earning high respect among them. Her active participation in discussions helps her to find value in any challenging task or ambitious project.

Galina's success is based on her own hard work and dedication. She values these qualities in others and is known for her noble and tolerant nature, always showing understanding towards others.

As a former student, colleague and friend, I am delighted to extend my warmest congratulations to Galina Anatolyevna on her anniversary! Throughout the years, you have inspired us with your dedication, wisdom, and unwavering commitment to the preservation and study of Udmurt folklore. Your ability to combine teaching with administrative duties with such grace and professionalism is truly admirable. I wish you boundless energy to continue your important work, creative inspiration that fuels your passion for knowledge, and every success in achieving your loftiest goals and ideas.

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# Jawaharlal Handoo, a Legendary Hero of Folklore Studies in India

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I had the profound privilege of meeting Professor Jawaharlal Handoo (1945–2025) in the year 1985, during the IXth Indian Folklore Congress hosted at Sambalpur University, India. At that time, folklore had yet to gain formal recognition as a full-fledged academic discipline within Indian universities, unlike the more structured presence it enjoys today. I had presented a research paper titled “*Female Infanticide among the Kondh Tribes of Kalahandi*”. Following my presentation, Dr. Handoo approached me with a keen interest in my work. I informed him that I was a student of literature, and I had arrived at the university to submit my doctoral thesis on the folklore traditions of Kalahandi.

To my astonishment, he invited me to his guest house for an in-depth discussion on the emerging contours of folklore studies. It was during that intimate exchange that I first realized folklore was not merely a peripheral cultural pursuit but a prestigious and evolving academic discipline in its own right. When I confessed my limited familiarity with global folkloristic theories and methodologies, Dr. Handoo graciously promised to invite me to a specialized workshop, where I could deepen my understanding and engage with the broader, international discourse on folklore studies.

Dr. Handoo, alongside Dr. Dulal Chaudhuri of Calcutta, was instrumental in establishing the Indian Folklore Congress, a pioneering platform that galvanized scholarly discourse across the country. Together, they organized a series of folklore seminars in collaboration with universities and cultural institutions throughout India. Over a span of four decades, no fewer than thirty-five

seminars were conducted, attracting scholars, academicians and researchers from both India and abroad.

In India, folklore often finds itself caught between disciplinary boundaries. Anthropologists tend to view it as an extension of literature, while literary scholars often relegate it to the domain of anthropology. This disciplinary ambiguity has led many literature departments to undervalue or overlook the study of folklore altogether. During our conversation, Dr. Handoo urged me to take folkloristics seriously following the theoretical frameworks originating in the western world. Inspired and guided by his wisdom, I embarked on a scholarly journey into folklore studies through a more structured, comparative and theoretical lens.

Since that formative encounter, I have remained a devoted admirer of Professor Handoo – whose vision, mentorship and unwavering commitment to Indian folkloristics have left an indelible mark on generations of scholars.

In October 1986, I was deeply honoured to receive an invitation from Dr. Jawaharlal Handoo to participate in a fifteen-day intensive course on Folklore Theory and Methodology, held in the historic city of Calcutta. This meticulously curated workshop, led by Dr. Handoo himself, proved to be a turning point in my academic journey. Under his erudite guidance, I was introduced to the theoretical frameworks, research methodologies, and critical paradigms that shaped global folkloristics. His teaching was not merely instructional – it was transformative. Recognizing my fervent commitment to the field, Dr. Handoo nominated me to serve as the Regional Secretary of the Indian Folklore Congress (IFC), a responsibility I held with great pride for five consecutive years.

During this period, we collaboratively organised several annual sessions of the Indian Folklore Congress in various Indian universities, fostering dialogue and scholarship among researchers, students and cultural practitioners. In 1994 and 1996, Dr. Handoo and I jointly convened three significant folklore workshops and seminars across Odisha, bringing the discipline into the heartland of indigenous oral traditions.

A landmark event unfolded in 1995, when Dr. Handoo, then the Head of the Folklore Unit at the Central Institute of Indian Languages (CIIL), Mysore, orchestrated the prestigious 9th Session of the International Society for Folk Narrative Research (ISFNR) – the first of its kind to be held outside of Europe. Hosted at CIIL, the conference brought together over 400 eminent folklorists across the globe. The presence of a diverse range of folkloric genres and sub-genres elevated the status of global folkloristics, inspiring Indian scholars to recognise the urgent relevance and global resonance of folklore studies in the national context.

Dr. Handoo was instrumental in establishing dedicated folklore departments in several Indian universities, as well as extending his influence across borders to Bangladesh. Over the span of his illustrious career, he conducted more than fifty folklore workshops across various Indian states, tirelessly advocating for



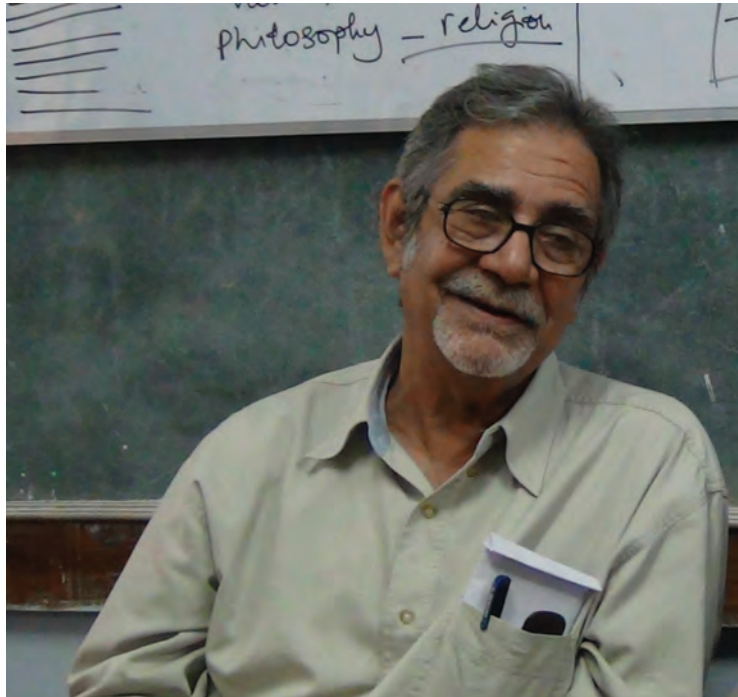
the inclusion of folklore as a distinct and essential subject within departments of literature and humanities.

What truly distinguished Dr. Handoo was not only his intellectual prowess but his gracious and magnetic personality, which inspired countless young scholars to venture into the vibrant world of folklore. His vision, charisma and indefatigable spirit laid a strong foundation for the study of folklore in South Asia, turning an often-neglected cultural heritage into a thriving field of academic inquiry.

After earning my doctorate in folklore, I entered the field of education as an Assistant Director in Primary and Basic Education under the Government of Odisha. Simultaneously, I served as a member of the State Academy of Letters, bridging two seemingly distinct realms – education and folklore. Yet, beneath the surface, there existed an intangible synergy between my administrative responsibilities and my scholarly devotion to cultural traditions. This hidden connection was gently illuminated by Dr. Chittaranjan Das, a Gandhian thinker and psychoanalyst trained at Copenhagen University, who profoundly influenced my intellectual path. He affirmed that education and culture are not parallel pursuits, but complementary forces, each enriching the other. Dr. Jawaharlal Handoo, too, shared this conviction. It was through their insights that I envisioned a new academic direction – applying folklore in school education by integrating community knowledge systems into classroom teaching, particularly in language and environmental studies at the primary level.

**Jawaharlal Handoo**  
in 2011 at a folklore  
seminar in Vidyasagar  
University, West Bengal.

**Photograph:** Mahendra Kumar  
Mishra, from personal archive.



When I joined the Multilingual Education (MLE) programme for indigenous children in Odisha, it was folklore that lit the path forward. Drawing from community oral traditions, I developed a culturally responsive curriculum and context-specific teacher training – an endeavour that placed Odisha at the forefront of inclusive educational reform in India. This vision would not have been possible without the foundation I received from folklore studies, and it was deeply appreciated and affirmed by Prof. Lauri Honko and Dr Handoo.

Thus, my engagement with folklore transcended theoretical inquiry and found practical expression in applied folkloristics within the school curriculum. Even as I redirected my academic compass, I remained steadfast in my research on oral epics, which garnered encouragement and scholarly camaraderie from eminent Western folklorists such as Prof. Lauri Honko, Karsten and Anniki Kaivola-Bregenhøj, Mary Ellen Brown, John Miles Foley and Gregory Nagy.

Throughout his journey, Dr. Handoo remained a central force, deeply connected with the nation's intellectual stalwarts including Kapila Vatsyayan, Dr. Debi Prasanna Pattanayak, Dr. Molly Kaushal, Prof. S. C. Malik, Prof. Brindavan Chandra Acharya, Prof. Khageswar Mahapatra, Prof. Birendra Nath Datta, Dr. Dulal Chaudhury, Dr. Soumen Sen and Krishnadev Upadhyay. These towering figures of Indian folkloristics, under the banner of the Indian Folklore Congress, convened annually to advance the cause of folklore scholarship in India.

Over the years, Dr. Jawaharlal Handoo and I participated in numerous national and international seminars devoted to folklore, oral epics and folk narratives, where his towering presence and impassioned advocacy for India's oral traditions were always profoundly felt. His lifelong commitment to institutionalizing folklore studies in India was not merely an academic pursuit, but a devotional struggle – gentle in spirit, yet resolute in purpose. Establishing oral traditions and folk knowledge within the formal academic structure of India was no simple feat. Yet, through his unwavering dedication, formidable intellect and visionary leadership, Dr. Handoo carved a lasting space for folklore in the Indian knowledge system.

It was under his influence that folklore gained recognition as an academic subject by the University Grants Commission (UGC), and several state governments were inspired to initiate research, documentation and publication projects that elevated indigenous knowledge traditions. Dr. Handoo's encouragement of individual scholars, his ability to discern potential and his generous mentoring spirit became the cornerstone of a movement that brought folkloristics into national academic discourse.

His contribution, spanning nearly five decades (1975–2025), represents a veritable epoch in the history of Indian folklore studies. As a legendary teacher, he transformed the academic landscape, making space for the oral

traditions of India to breathe, speak, and thrive within the walls of universities and research institutions.

I, too, had the privilege of walking alongside him on this remarkable journey. Together, we shared many platforms, and in Odisha, I organised three folklore workshops and a major seminar, all of which were enriched by Dr. Handoo's support and scholarly presence.

Dr. Jawaharlal Handoo was a towering intellectual force who endeavoured to place folklore at the very heart of the humanities in India. Endowed with a rare blend of acute observational insight and analytical depth, he drew inspiration from the giants of Western folkloristics while forging a distinctly Indian scholastic voice. His landmark work, *Current Trends in Folklore* (1986), served as a pioneering beacon for Indian scholars, introducing them to global theoretical and methodological frameworks with clarity and conviction.

Between 1978 and 1980, Dr. Handoo also edited the *Journal of Indian Folkloristics*, curating essays of international calibre and offering Indian academia a rare window into world folkloristics. Although financial constraints led to the journal's untimely discontinuation, its impact on the Indian folklore community remained indelible.

As the head of the Folklore Unit at the Central Institute of Indian Languages (CIIL), Mysore, Dr. Handoo worked with tireless devotion, often single-handedly managing the department with the support of a lone research associate and his devoted wife, Lalita Handoo, who served in the institute as well. His vision was vast, his commitment unwavering. He championed a scholarly approach that honoured the rich cultural plurality of India, nurturing a national consciousness rooted in the shared wisdom of its oral traditions. Through his work, Dr. Handoo not only advanced folklore as an academic discipline but also reaffirmed its role as a vital vessel of Indian cultural identity.

Dr. Jawaharlal Handoo championed the cause of folklore with a deep conviction that distinguished it from other fields of knowledge, particularly linguistics, which he regarded as primarily concerned with the formal structures of grammar – thus often confined to the intellectual domain of grammarians and linguists. In contrast, folklore, he believed, embodied the lived wisdom of the people, rooted in the rhythms, rituals and oral traditions of everyday life. It was, to him, a mirror of the lifeworld, a discipline intimately woven into the cultural, emotional and cognitive fabric of communities.

Folklore, as Dr. Handoo often emphasized, was not merely an archive of narratives or customs but a dynamic force that sustains social cohesion, identity and moral values. It serves as a vital reservoir of collective memory, regulating both personal and communal consciousness through stories, songs, rituals and customs. He saw in folklore a profound educative power, nurturing cognitive development while preserving ethical worldviews and inherited wisdom.

Here, I am reminded of the visionary insights of Dr. A. K. Ramanujan, who once envisioned the Indian cognitive system as being inextricably linked to its

oral traditions, seeing in them the distilled spirit of Indian values and cosmologies. Ramanujan and Handoo, though distinct in approach, shared a common aspiration – to uncover an Indian epistemology within folklore, to explore how India thinks, remembers and imagines through its oral legacy. Both scholars recognized that while folklore universals transcend national boundaries, there remains an Indian way of seeing and knowing folklore, deeply rooted in the subcontinent's pluralistic ethos.

Through his tireless scholarship, institution-building and international engagement, he not only advanced Indian folkloristics but also placed it firmly on the global academic map.

Dr. Jawaharlal Handoo's publication of *Indian Folklore* Volumes I and II under the auspices of CIIL, Mysore, marked a moment in the study of Indian folkloristics. These volumes served as invaluable resources for both Indian and international scholars, offering deep insights into the multilingual and multicultural fabric of Indian folklore. With scholarly precision and cultural sensitivity, Dr. Handoo illuminated the vast and varied narrative traditions of India, foregrounding the diversity that defines its oral and performative heritage.

His writings reflect a seamless interplay between scholarly analysis and cultural empathy. He was never dismissive of indigenous knowledge systems. On the contrary, his position was both inclusive and harmonizing – he asserted that folklore transcends the binaries of indigenous and non-indigenous, elite and subaltern, and instead constructs a cultural unity that fosters social harmony.

Dr. Handoo was particularly critical of the anthropological gaze that often fragmented society into categories of elites, tribes and peasants, thus reinforcing hegemonic binaries. He argued for folklore as an autonomous discipline, distinct in its foundations and approach. While disciplines like anthropology and literature have historically dominated and overshadowed folklore within Indian academia, folklore, in his view, was not merely a derivative subject but a foundational discourse capable of reimagining cultural studies through the lenses of lived experience, marginal memory and ethical imagination.

In a landscape where oral traditions, local wisdom and vernacular knowledge systems have long been marginalised, Dr. Handoo envisioned folklore as a form of cultural resistance and empowerment – a space where the silenced voices of subaltern communities could find legitimate scholarly expression. He championed folklore as a site of cultural democracy, one that honours plurality, dignity and human values, deeply rooted in the civilisational ethos of India.

Dr. Jawaharlal Handoo's journey as a folklorist was profoundly enriched by his enduring engagement with the global community of folkloristics. Through his extensive travels across the East and West, he forged intellectual companionships with some of the most eminent voices in world folklore, including Richard Dorson, Alan Dundes, Dan Ben-Amos, Kenneth Goldstein, Lauri Honko, Lauri Harvilahti, Anna-Leena Siikala, Mihály Hoppál, John Miles Foley,

Mare Kõiva and Ülo Valk, among many others. These associations allowed him to reimagine Indian folklore through a global lens, situating it within the broader frameworks of comparative and collaborative folkloristics.

A tireless ambassador of cultural scholarship, Dr. Handoo played a pivotal role in fostering Indo-European and Indo-American academic collaborations. He facilitated transnational research projects and supported legendary scholars such as Peter J. Claus in the study of Tulu epics and Lauri Honko in documenting the Siri epic tradition of South India. Under his mentorship and vision, folklore studies flourished as a discipline in several Indian universities, including Kannada University, Mysore University, Gauhati University, Tezpur University and Kalyani University, where structured M.A. and Ph.D. programmes in folkloristics were formally established.

As an author Dr Handoo published his research work such as “Current Trends in Folklore”, “Folklore in Modern India”, “Tradition and Modernity in Folklore Theory”, “Theoretical Essays on Folklore”, “Folklore and Discourse: A Study of Communicative Interaction in Folklore Performances”, “Folklore and Historiography”, “Folklore and Tribal Studies”, “Language, Culture and Folk Wisdom”, “Text and Performance: A Study of Oral Narrative Tradition”, “Folk Epics of India.”

Among his distinguished contemporaries in Indian folkloristics were luminaries like V. A. Vivek Rai, K. D. Upadhyay, Kunjabihari Das, Prafulla Dutta Goswami, Vidyanivas Mishra, Birendranath Datta, Soumen Sen, Dulal Chaudhury, Somnath Dhar, Surajit Singh, Sudhakar Reddy, S. Lourdu, Hiranmay Ambalike, Bhabagrahi Mishra and Bhakta Batsala Reddy. Together, they constituted a vibrant intellectual circle that laid the foundational stones of South Asian folkloristics.

Dr. Handoo’s contributions extended beyond India’s borders. His deep association with the Nepal Folklore Society, the Bangla Academy, and various universities in Bangladesh reflected his commitment to shaping the cultural identities of neighbouring nations through folklore. His frequent visits to these countries were not mere ceremonial exchanges but strategic efforts to promote the academic growth and cultural preservation of South Asian folklore.

A visionary par excellence, he dedicated his entire life to the pursuit of folkloristics, nurturing it not just as a discipline, but as a calling, a dream, and a national cultural mission. His commitment was uncompromising; he held high expectations for academic rigor and was deeply pained whenever scholarship faltered in quality or vision. Yet, it was precisely this rigorous standard and ethical clarity that shaped a generation of Indian folklorists – many of whom today serve as professors and cultural thinkers across Indian universities.

Dr. Handoo was a man of warmth and humour. In informal circles, his quick wit, affectionate storytelling and infectious laughter made him beloved by colleagues and students alike. Even in scholarly settings, his creative wit and psychological insight allowed him to unearth deep meanings from symbolic

narratives. He leaned more toward psychological interpretations of folklore than rigid anthropological frameworks, always seeking to relate the content with context, and the individual with the collective.

His unyielding commitment to academic integrity sometimes made him a misunderstood figure. Yet, those who truly knew him understood that his sternness was born of an unwavering love for knowledge and a desire to uphold the dignity of folklore as a serious academic discipline. He stood firm in his ideals, never compromising on the standards he believed folklore scholarship must embody.

Dr. Handoo was indeed a global folklorist rooted in Indian soil – a scholar trained in Western traditions, yet wholly committed to the richness and complexity of Indian folklore. His tireless efforts brought academic recognition to regional and indigenous knowledge systems, giving Indian folklore a global voice while preserving its local soul.

His passing is a profound loss – a void that cannot be filled. He was, and will remain, a legendary hero of Indian folkloristics, whose influence radiates across continents and generations. I am grateful to the Estonian Literary Museum for honouring his memory with an obituary volume, a fitting tribute to a man who gave his life to understanding and celebrating the oral wisdom of humankind.

Dr. Handoo's legacy will endure, not only in books and institutions, but in the hearts and minds of those he inspired. His spirit lives on in every tale retold, every voice preserved and every scholar he awakened to the power of folklore.

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**Dr. Mahendra Kumar Mishra** is a noted folklorist of India. He has written "Oral Epics of Kalahandi", "Visioning Folklore", "Paharia Oral Tradition", "Saora Folklore", "Ramayana in the Oral Tradition of Odisha" and, "Multilingual Education in India". Dr Mishra is the first recipient of UNESCO's International Mother Language Award in 2023. He is the Chief Editor of Lokaratna, an international E journal of Folklore Foundation, India.

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# *IN MEMORIAM*

## Kristin Kuutma

### 11. VII 1959 – 16. V 2025



Kristin Kuutma, Professor of Cultural Studies at the University of Tartu and Head of the UNESCO Chair on Applied Studies of Intangible Cultural Heritage, has passed away. A distinguished anthropologist, ethnologist and folklorist, she was a deeply influential voice in shaping the understanding of cultural heritage.

Kristin Kuutma was born in Tallinn into a culturally inclined family. Her roots were firmly grounded in the childhood and youth she spent in Northern Tallinn and the coastal villages of the Viimsi peninsula, where her grandparents once met. After graduating from Tallinn Secondary School No. 7, now Tallinn English College, she began her studies in English language and literature at Tartu State University in 1977, drawn to the field as one less burdened

by ideological constraints. After completing her degree in 1982, she worked as a proofreader at the publishing house Eesti Raamat, then moved on to become an editor at the Folk Culture Development Centre (today the Estonian Centre of Folk Culture). One of her most memorable assignments from that period was translating traditional runic ballads into English. She actively participated in the folk ensembles Leegajus and Hellero, and later described “these eye-opening and educational experiences as a living laboratory of development in the fields of ethnology and folkloristics, which also provided valuable insights into the organisational aspects of the folk culture field.”

Kristin Kuutma was a founding member of the Estonian Folklore Society – the predecessor of the Estonian Folklore Council – established in 1988 as the first voluntary organisation of its kind in the Baltic States. She played a key role in shaping the foundations of the folklore movement, many of which remain in place today. In recognition of her contributions, she was named an honorary member of the Estonian Folklore Council in 2024.

With the arrival of a new era came new opportunities, which Kristin Kuutma embraced without hesitation. From 1994 to 2000, she worked as a translator and editor in the Department of Folkloristics at the Institute of the Estonian Language. After earning a master’s degree in Estonian and comparative folklore at the University of Tartu in 1998, focusing on folklore festivals as contemporary traditions, she pursued further studies in the United States at the University of Washington, earning a second master’s degree in Scandinavian studies in 1999 and a doctoral degree in 2002. Her doctoral dissertation, which explored the making of the Seto epic Peko and the ethnography of the Sámi, formed the basis for her 2005 Estonian-language monograph (Kuutma 2005) and her 2006 English-language book published in the prestigious Folklore Fellows’ Communications series in Finland (Kuutma 2006).

After completing her doctorate, Kristin Kuutma returned to Estonia, where she worked as a researcher at the Estonian Literary Museum and taught at the University of Tartu. In 2007, she was appointed Professor *extraordinaria* of Cultural Studies and became Professor *ordinaria* in 2010. That same decade, she was also invited as a visiting professor at the University of St. Andrews. Kristin Kuutma was closely involved with the Estonian Doctoral School in Humanities and Arts, launched in 2009. As the organiser of the Tartu Winter School for doctoral students, she placed great importance on the development of new ideas and on fostering interdisciplinary and inter-university dialogue, shaping the landscape of contemporary humanities in Estonia.

Through her theoretical courses and supervision, she influenced generations of researchers’ understanding of ethnography as cultural description and of the cultural scholar as both observer and creator of representations. Her research interests centred on the social applications of traditional culture and its transformation into heritage, the interplay between heritage and identity,

and heritage policy. She published extensively on the history of folkloristics and ethnology and was about to embark on an international research project with Scandinavian and Baltic colleagues on the topic of communal singing – a subject dear to her heart.

As a teacher, Kristin Kuutma was both compassionate and supportive, yet also demanding and consistent. With the keen eye of a cultural scholar, she observed the world from a thoughtful distance, trusting her instincts and stepping in when asked. Her family and loved ones meant a great deal to her. In addition to her academic work, she held numerous organisational and administrative roles in both Estonia and international forums. For several years, she represented Estonia in the Standing Committee for the Humanities of the European Science Foundation.

Kristin Kuutma's life's work can be seen in the introduction and critical analysis of the concept of intangible cultural heritage, as well as in elucidating UNESCO's role and opportunities in both academic and public contexts, in Estonia and internationally. From 2008 to 2022, she served as Chair of the Council of the Estonian National Commission for UNESCO, and later as a member of the Expert Committee and Head of the Executive Board when the Commission was merged with the Ministry of Culture. She was a reliable advisor and advocate whenever matters related to UNESCO and intangible heritage arose.

In 2003, she received the annual award of the Cultural Endowment of Estonia for her scholarly analysis and report on the song and dance festivals of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, as well as the cultural space of Kihnu – a contribution that led to their inscription on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. From 2006 to 2010, Professor Kuutma represented Estonia on UNESCO's Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage. During this mandate, she was elected Vice-Chair of the Committee and, from 2009 to 2010, chaired the subcommittee that evaluated nominations to the Representative List. Her close collaboration with the UNESCO Secretariat continued in subsequent years, during which she was invited to advise South Africa and Eritrea on implementing the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. She participated in countless UNESCO conferences and expert meetings, contributing actively to shaping global heritage policy.

Domestically, she promoted the development of the intangible heritage field in Estonia in line with UNESCO frameworks and was a member of the advisory council for intangible cultural heritage under the Ministry of Culture. Under her leadership, the University of Tartu launched the UNESCO Chair on Applied Studies of Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2019.

Kristin Kuutma had a broad worldview. She often emphasised that being a member of UNESCO obliges us to think beyond an Estonian or European focus – to see the world as a whole and to understand its challenges. For her, it

was vital that Estonia act as an engaged and respected contributor on the global stage, rather than a passive observer. Through her determined and thoughtful participation as a UNESCO expert, she advanced this vision.

Kristin Kuutma has been honoured with the University of Tartu Badge of Distinction (2014) and Medal (2019), a Certificate of Appreciation from the Estonian Research Council (2014) and several other awards.

Institute for Cultural Research, University of Tartu

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# The Finno-Ugric Literary Café and Poetry Collection

In 2023 and 2024, the Estonian Literary Museum hosted poetry meetings as part of the so-called Finno-Ugric literary café (Soome-ugri kirjanduskohvik, SUKK). The project was supported by the Estonian Ministry of Education and Research through the Kindred Peoples Programme.

## THE LITERARY CAFÉ

The idea of the Literary Café in general is to discover other languages through different senses. The same literary work is spoken in different languages and in this way participants can ‘taste’ another language by speaking it, as each language is revealed in all its beauty and uniqueness. Listening to and reading one linguistic artefact in different participants offers the opportunity to understand the phonetic features of the languages and get to know their melodies.

The aim of the Literary Café is to increase understanding between different cultural and linguistic communities through literature. Multiculturalists, translators and enthusiasts are invited to attend. The Literary Café uses the method of close reading to present different literary works and read texts in different languages (originals and translations) in order to hear the characteristics of languages and learn about the nuances of cultures.

The Literary Café also brings together experts to talk about the history of a work and the peculiarities of its translation, and the difficulties of understanding the text and its interpretation. Comments on the translations help participants to see the peculiarities of the linguistic worldview that influence the specificity of the language.

Another goal of the Literary Café is to motivate interest in the process of translation and to help participants understand the possibilities and limitations

of transferring meanings from one language to another, which helps to overcome the linguocentrism inherent in any culture and increase the value of languages other than the mother tongue. Therefore, both professional and amateur translators are invited to Literary Café meetings.

## THE FINNO-UGRIC LITERARY CAFÉ

The Finno-Ugric Literary Café has been running for two seasons on the premises of the Estonian Literary Museum. The first project started in April 2023 with meetings once a month, except for July and August, for a total of seven meetings in 2023. The project was designed to run for one year, but at the request of SUKK participants and encouraged by the positive feedback, we decided to continue. We re-opened the café in April 2024. We had six events planned for the new season.

Each SUKK event was dedicated to a work of Finno-Ugric literature and its translations. The choice of authors and works was largely determined by the availability of translations, so we tried to find as many as possible. Unfortunately, for some works we found only a few. When we had to choose between several authors and/or poems, we sought expert advice. Unfortunately, some Finno-Ugric literature has not been translated, so the new translations made by the participants of our meetings fill this gap to some extent. There is very little biographical information about some authors, even though they are recognised as classics within their respective national cultures. We have also tried to fill this gap.

The meetings were held in a relaxed atmosphere over a cup of tea/coffee, usually with national pastries of the respective nation. The following poems by Finno-Ugric writers were performed at SUKK evenings over the two years (in chronological order of the thematic evenings):

**Komi** – Ivan Kuratov: “Менам муза” (My muse)

**Udmurt** – Ashalchi Oki: “Сюрес дурын” (By the road)

**Hungarian** – Sándor Petőfi: “Nemzeti dal” (National song)

**Mari** – Sergei Chavain: “Ото” (Grove)

**Moksha** – Raya Orlova: “Сире пингонь мокшень мора” (Old Moksha song)

**Erzya** – Yakov Kuldurkaev: “Эрмезь” (‘Ermez’)

**Estonian** – Lydia Koidula: “Mu isamaa on minu arm” (My homeland is my love)

**Livonian** – Baiba Damberga: “Kõd kiēlkōks ma sīndiz” (I was born with two languages)

**Livvi-Karelian** – Alexander Volkov: “Liivin virret” (A word about the Livs)

**Nenets** – Yuri Vella: “Няхадовш” (Nenets triptych)



**Saami** – Nils-Aslak Valkeapää: “Mu ruoktu lea mu váimmus” (My home is in my heart)

**Mansi** – Yuvan Shestalov: “Mākem at” (Breath of the Motherland)

## NEW POETIC TRANSLATIONS

In the two years of the existence of the Finno-Ugric Literary Café our meetings have been attended by people with a wide variety of native languages and cultural backgrounds from Estonia and abroad such as Poland, Ukraine, Great Britain, France, Hungary, Finland and others. We invited the participants to translate the selected works into their (native) languages; we are happy that there are still many translators among us who love poetry. Some of the translators were very active and submitted translations of several works, while others managed to translate only a few poems. Przemysław Podleśny, who translated all the poems discussed at SUKK into Polish, deserves special mention in this respect. Some of the translators had completed their translations before our project, but not published them, and these translators have kindly provided them to us for publication. The translation of Sándor Petőfi’s “National Song” into the Seto language by Anti Lillak within the framework of the SUKK project was published for the first time last spring (see Lillaku 2024: 10).

The poems have been translated into quite a number of languages: English, Erzya, Esperanto, Estonian, Finnish, French, Hungarian, Italian, Kazakh, Komi, Moksha, Polish, Réunion Creole, Rumenian, Russian, Seto, Udmurt, Vepsian, Votic, and Võro. Thus, in two years we have collected more than 60 new literary translations, a huge number.

The same poem sounds different in every language. Each translator shapes it in his or her own way. In collecting new translations, we did not want to judge their quality or consistency with the original. (Let language specialists, professional poets and literary critics do that.) Our aim was different. We wanted to encourage people who speak these languages to make new translations of Finno-Ugric works into as many languages as possible, so that Finno-Ugric literature can become better known. By the way, to our surprise, some poems were translated in disappointingly small numbers.

## THE BOOK

From the poems translated for the SUKK we have compiled and published a book (the project was also supported through the Kindred Peoples Programme). The book is a direct result of the activities of the Finno-Ugric Literary Café.

The structure of the book follows the sequence of SUKK events. Thus, it is divided into blocks by author.

Each block contains brief information about the author. We deliberately took information about the authors from the most multilingual ‘people’s’

encyclopaedia Wikipedia, so that each reader can refer to the quoted text and read a more extensive article (sometimes we had to shorten the Wikipedia text, sometimes supplement it), and by switching to an article about the author written in another language, find new data (articles in different languages in Wikipedia, even about the same person are noticeably different).

After the information about the author, each block is followed by an original poem by that author and new translations of the work in different languages.

Each block ends with a commentary by experts who provide information about the author and his or her work in general, discuss the work from a linguistic, artistic, poetic and/or other point of view, and draw attention to the peculiarities and possible difficulties of translation.

And so on for each author and each work discussed. In total, 13 Finno-Ugric authors are represented in the book: in addition to the 12 SUKK authors listed above, we have added the Finnish poet Eino Leino and his famous work “Nocturne”, which was discussed in another similar project (‘Keeled ühendavad’, The Integration Foundation), but which is ideally suited for this book, despite the fact that we have to be content with only one new translation of this poem.

## CONCLUSION

In a way, the book is a summary of what was done in the Finno-Ugric Literary Café held at the Estonian Literary Museum in 2023 and 2024. With both the Café and the book, we want to contribute to the promotion and dissemination of Finno-Ugric languages and literatures, as well as raising awareness of the value of different languages in general. The book consists of poetry and texts in different languages. We believe that it will bring aesthetic pleasure and the joy of discovery to both poetry lovers and professional philologists. We hope that it will also be a source of inspiration for translators.

Nikolay Kuznetsov, Sergey Troitskiy

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  - **Vito Carrassi.** The Purgatory Souls as Interceding Agents Between Earth and Heaven
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**On the cover:** Cemetery in Zlatno, central Slovakia. Photograph: Michal Uhrin, November 1, 2024.

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