

Introduction

MIRJAM MENCEJ

Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology, Faculty of Arts,
University of Ljubljana, Slovenia
mirjam.mencej@ff.uni-lj.si

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.

REFERENCES

Mencej, Mirjam 2025. Uncanny Experience and Its Meaning-Making as Moral Experience. *Numen, International Review for History of Religions*, Vol. 72, No. 4, pp. 345–371.

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.

mirjam.mencej@ff.uni-lj.si