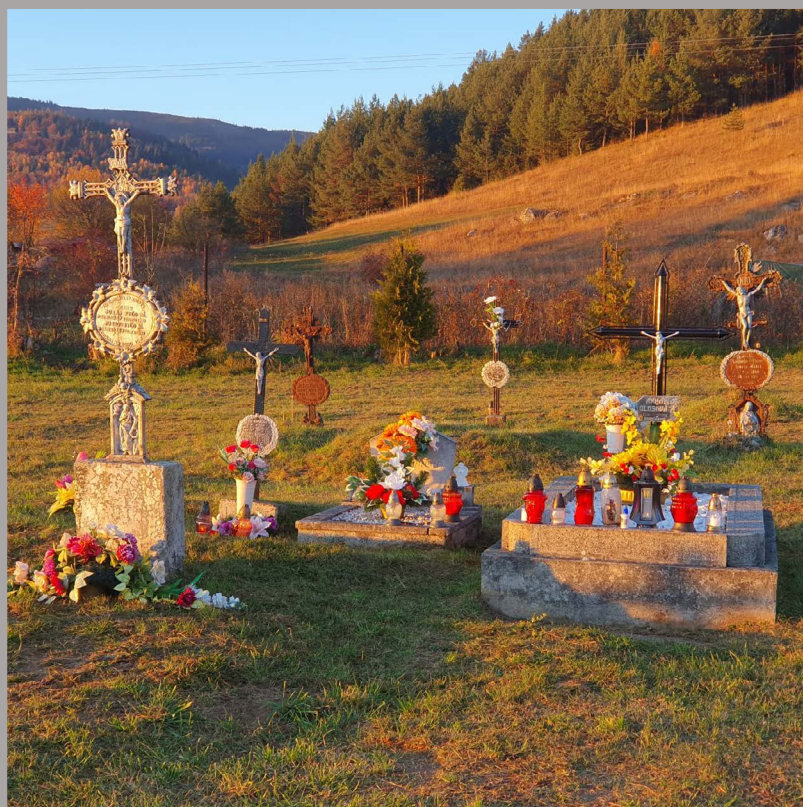


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DIPARTIMENTO DI LINGUE E LETTERATURE, COMUNICAZIONE,
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Ljubljana
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PERSONALIA

Éva Pócs, devetdesetletnica

Éva Pócs je nedvomno ena izmed tistih oseb, za katere je zagotovo mogoče reči, da so leta zgolj številka. Rojena leta 1936 na Madžarskem je letos junija praznovala že svoj devetdeseti rojstni dan, a njena energija, delavnost in produktivnost kljub letom ostajajo skoraj nespremenjene. Kljub nekaterim zdravstvenim tegobam, ki pač pridejo z leti, še vedno piše članke, ureja knjige, predava – in ostaja prav tako mladostnega duha, kot je bila, ko sem jo prvič srečala.

Évo sem spoznala daljnega leta 1998, ko smo skupaj s kolegicami Mojco Ramšak, Natalijo Vrečer in Neno Židov ter kolegom Rajkom Muršičem, tedaj mladimi raziskovalkami in raziskovalci na Oddelku za etnologijo in kulturno antropologijo Filozofske fakultete na Univerzi v Ljubljani, organizirali mednarodno konferenco na temo smrti, ki je potekala v Slovenskem etnografskem muzeju (gl. Muršič, 1998; *Etnolog* 9 (1), 1999). Čeprav smo kot uradni jezik konference napovedali angleški jezik, se je po prihodu vseh sodelujočih izkazalo, da bodo slovanski jeziki primernejši – za vse, razen, seveda, za Évo. Kolega Robert Oravec je kot dvojezični govorec sicer prijazno nudil simultano prevajanje v madžarščino in Rajko Muršič prevajanje v angleščino, a marsikdo bi se ob takšni nenapovedani spremembi upravičeno ujezil – vendar ne Éva. Kljub temu da je bila takrat že mednarodno uveljavljena raziskovalka, je skromno ostala na konferenci in poslušala prevode predavanj, ne da bi kakorkoli izrazila svoje nestrinjanje s situacijo, ki zanj zagotovo ni bila ugodna, ali vztrajala pri obljubljeni angleščini. Ko se zdaj oziram nazaj, se mi zdi, da je to njeno ravnanje že takrat razkrivalo njeno skromnost, ki sem jo v različnih situacijah vedno znova opazala tudi pozneje.

Éva Pócs je leta 1960 doštudirala iz madžarske folkloristike, muzeologije in pedagogike na Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE) v Budimpešti. Svojo akademsko pot je začela v Damjanich János Múzeum v Szolnoku na Madžarskem. V letih 1965–1968 je bila kot raziskovalka zaposlena na Oddelku za folkloristiko Univerze v Budimpešti, zatem pa se je zaposlila na Madžarski akademiji znanosti, kjer je kot raziskovalka delovala med letoma 1968 in 1989. Leta 1982 je tudi doktorirala iz etnologije (folkloristike). Od leta



1990 do leta 2001 je bila vodja Instituta za etnografijo, a tudi po delni upokojitvi leta 2001 je nadaljevala svoje raziskovalno delo na Madžarski akademiji znanosti. Med letoma 1993 in 2008 je tudi poučevala na Univerzi Janus Pannonius (PTE) v Pécsu, najprej kot izredna in od 1999 kot redna profesorica. Leta 2008, ob upokojitvi, je bila izvoljena v zaslužno profesorico.

Prav Pécs je kraj, kjer se je moja akademska pot ponovno križala z Évino – prostori akademije v Pécsu so namreč za nekaj let, pod njenim vodstvom in v njeni organizaciji, postali prizorišče odmevnih mednarodnih konferenc (“Body, Souls, Spirits and Supernatural Communication” (2012), “Sacrifice, Ordeal, Divination” (2014), “Faith and Doubt” (2015) in “Present and Past: Contemporary and Historical Perspectives in the Anthropological Study of Religious Life” (2017), na katerih smo se srečevali raziskovalci in raziskovalke vernakularne religije in folklorne z vsega sveta. Mnoga mednarodna prijateljstva so bila stkana prav na teh nepozabnih konferencah, in ob večerih po njih, in te konference so bile, in za vedno ostajajo, moje najljubše.

Éva, ki je bila po izobrazbi sicer folkloristka, se nikoli ni omejevala zgolj na preučevanje zgodb in folklornih oblik kot takih, ampak jo je vedno zanimal kontekst lokalne religije in družbe, v katerega so bile te zgodbe vtakane. Ne čudi torej, da je bila – že od svojega trinajstega leta, kot se spominja v intervjuju (Bera, 2026) – tudi terenska raziskovalka in je na teren pogosto vodila tudi svoje študente. Od začetnega fokusa na zagovorih, s katerimi se je od svojega doktorata dalje ukvarjala tako rekoč vse življenje, se je v svoji karieri ukvarjala tudi z različnimi ljudskimi verovanji o nadnaravnih bitjih, z magijskimi specialisti, čarovništvom in mnogimi drugimi temami vernakularne religije. V svojih raziskavah je obravnavala predvsem madžarsko folkloro in vernakularno religijo, pogosto tudi v kontekstu primerjave le-te s srednje- in vzhodnoevropsko. Sodelovala je v mnogih projektih, med drugim pri Atlasu madžarske etnografije, topografiji madžarskih ljudskih verovanj ter v projektu o zgodnjemodernem madžarskem čarovništvu in demonologiji. Je tudi ustanoviteljica madžarske znanstvene revije *Studia Ethnologica Hungarica*, katere urednica je bila od leta 2000 do 2008.

Poleg ogromnega števila člankov je (so)izdala več monografij, od katerih naj omenim zgolj dve, ki sta izšli v angleščini: *Fairies and Witches at the Boundary of South-Eastern and Central Europe* (1989) in *Between the Living and the Dead: A Perspective on Witches and Seers in the Early Modern Age* (1999). Prav tako je uredila ali souredila več knjig, poleg mnogih madžarskih tudi nekaj v angleščini: *Body, Soul, Spirits and Supernatural Communication* (2019) in *The Magical and Sacred Medical World* (2019). Z Gáborjem Klaniczayem je souredila trodelno zbirko *Communicating with the Spirits; Witchcraft, Mythologies and Persecution; Demonology and Popular Mythology: Demons, Spirits, Witches* (2005) ter *Witchcraft and Demonology in Hungary and Transylvania* (2017). Skupaj z Jamesom Kapalóm ter Williamom Ryanom je uredila knjigo *The Power of Words: Studies on Charms and Charming in Europe* (2013), z Beo Vidacs knjigo *Faith, Doubt and Knowledge in Religious Thinking* (2020), z Ágnes Hesz knjigo *Present and Past in the Study of Religion and Magic* (2020) ter z Andrásom Zemplénijem knjigo *Spirit Possession: Multidisciplinary Approaches to a Worldwide Phenomenon* (2022). Pred dvema letoma sva skupaj uredili tudi posebno izdajo revije *Religions* (15, 2024).

Poleg znanstvenega dela je Éva vse svoje življenje skrbela tudi za vzpostavitev raznih arhivov z madžarskim gradivom – od arhiva madžarskih ljudskih povedk, zagovorov (zbirka zagovorov bo v angleškem jeziku kmalu izšla tudi v zbirki FFC na Finskem) do gradiva čarovniških procesov.

Za svoje delo je prejela številne nagrade, med drugim leta 2002 medaljo madžarskega etnografskega društva, leta 2004 Herderjevo priznanje, leta 2009 pa je postala častna članica International Society for Folk Narrative Research, v okviru katerega je bila tudi ena od ustanoviteljic komiteja Charms, Charmers and Charming.

Leta 2013 je Éva Pócs postala prejemnica prestižnega ERC projekta za uveljavljene raziskovalce. Projekt *“East-West”. Vernacular religion on the boundary of Eastern and Western Christianity: continuity, changes and interactions* (ERC project No. 324214; 2013–2018) je združeval zgodovinarje, folkloriste in antropologe, ki so raziskovali različne oblike vernakularne religioznosti na območju srednje in vzhodne Evrope. V času projekta smo se člani projekta najprej na univerzi v Pécsu, ko se je projekt preselil v Budimpešto, pa tam, vsake tri mesece srečevali na tridnevni sestankih, pogosto kar pri Évi doma, v njenem čudovitem stanovanju v starinski zgradbi sredi Budimpešte. Na teh srečanjih sem Évo bolje spoznala ne le kot odlično znanstvenico in organizatorko, ampak tudi po človeški plati – kot prijazno, spodbudno in prav nič vzvišeno kolegico. Izkušnja izjemne medsebojne podpore in nesebične pomoči Éve in drugih članov projektne skupine, ki smo ju bili deležni vsi sodelavci pri projektu, mi bo za vedno ostala v spominu kot ena najlepših v moji akademski karieri. Prepričana sem, da je bila zanjo zaslužna prav Éva s svojim načinom vodenja skupine, v kateri smo se vsi, od doktorskih študentov do starejših uveljavljenih kolegic, počutili enakovredne.

Vem, da tudi zdaj, ko je dopolnila svoj devetdeseti rojstni dan, Évine misli niso prav nič usmerjene v miren pokoj, in da je, prav tako kot nekoč, še vedno polna načrtov glede svojih prihodnjih raziskav. Zaželeli ji mir in počitek ob visokem jubileju bi se zato zdelo narobe. Naj ti torej, draga Éva, ob tvojem rojstnem dnevu zaželim še obilico užžitkov ob raziskovalnem delu ter mnogo člankov in knjig, ki ne bodo razveseljevali le tebe, ampak tudi tvoje zveste bralce!

Mirjam Mencej

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- Muršič, Rajko. 1998. Simpozij o etnoloških in antropoloških vidikih preučevanja smrti: Slovenski etnografski muzej, Ljubljana, 3.–9. 11. 1998. *Traditiones* 27: 261–264.

¹ Nekateri podatki v tem besedilu so bili pridobljeni iz intervjuja z Évo Pócs, ki ga je opravil Malay Bera in je bil objavljen v glasilu *ISFNR Newsletter* 15 (2026) ter z wikipedije (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C3%89va_P%C3%B3cs). Zahvaljujem se Ágnes Hesz za posredovanje manjkajočih informacij.

Razprave

Studi

Articles

Introduction – Rethinking the Agency of the Dead: Reasons, Triggers and Contexts

=====Ágnes Hesz, Tina Ivnik, Michal Uhrin=====

This special issue of *Studia Mythologica Slavica* is the outcome of the second international interdisciplinary conference organised within the framework of the ERC project *The Roles of the Agency of the Dead in the Lives of Individuals in Contemporary Society* (DEAGENCY, No. 101095729; 2023–2028).¹ This project seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the roles that the dead play in the lives of individuals within contemporary Western societies, with particular emphasis on post-socialist countries. It builds on the premise, advanced by various scholars, that the distinction between life and death is neither fixed nor universally defined; rather, it is continuously negotiated through communication, collective and individual (religious) rituals, artefacts and various practices (Bloch, Parry, 1982; Metcalf, Huntington, 1991). The project and the articles in this special issue explore the notion that the dead are not merely objects of remembrance but are also regarded as actors whose agency arises within specific cultural, material, and social contexts and influences the lives of individuals in contemporary societies (Maddrell, 2013; Klass, Steffen, 2018; Walter, 2019). Members of the DEAGENCY project examine these questions across a range of social and cultural contexts, including rural communities in Central and Eastern Europe (Hesz, 2025; Kuntarič Zupanc, 2025; Mencej, 2025a; Uhrin, 2025), contemporary alternative spiritual movements (Bužeková, 2025; Ivnik, 2025) and research on mass graves in the countries of the former Yugoslavia (Hamer, 2025; Repič, 2025).

Two international conferences have so far been held as part of the DEAGENCY project. The primary focus of the first DEAGENCY conference in 2024 was on experiences with, and the conceptualisation of experiences with the dead,² resulting in two special issues.³

¹ <https://erc-deagency.eu/>

² <https://erc-deagency.eu/deagency-conferences/>

³ The post-conference special issues can be found in *Folklore: Electronic Journal of Folklore* 96, 2025, and *Anthropological Notebooks* 31 (2), 2025.

The second conference, in 2025, explored the various reasons, triggers, contexts and ways in which the dead influence the lives of the living;⁴ this special issue contains ten of the papers presented at this conference.⁵

The DEAGENCY project considers the dead as entities actively involved in the lives of the living and as actors within broader social and cultural processes (Mencej, 2025b). The authors in this special issue broadly adopt this perspective and examine the agency of the dead through diverse theoretical and methodological lenses. Exploring a wide range of cultural, social, historical and religious settings, the articles show us how the agency of the dead may manifest through objects and space, religious or spiritual experts, in dreams, art and popular culture.

While participants at the conference came from various disciplines – such as geography, history, sociology, thanatology, religious studies, bereavement studies and psychology – the papers in this special issue are mainly folkloristic and anthropological in their approach. The data and materials analysed in the articles were collected using various methodologies, including ethnographic fieldwork, large-scale surveys, textual and archival research, and discursive analysis of how the agency of the dead is represented in popular culture and artistic production. The contributions reflect a broad comparative scope, drawing on research and materials from Iceland, Japan, the United Kingdom, Finland, Lithuania, Slovenia, Hungary, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Slovakia.

As mentioned above, the authors in this special issue focus on situations in which the agency of the dead manifests and the circumstances under which it is experienced. They address this question from different perspectives, which is why the articles in the special issue are organised thematically. The first two papers focus on the material dimensions of interactions with the dead. In her paper, *Grave Goods and Dialectical Post-Death Agency in the Contemporary UK: Individual and Relational, Active and Passive, Past and Present*, **Jennifer Riley** examines the role of grave goods – clothing and objects left with the deceased and not easily retrievable by the living – in contemporary funerary practices in the United Kingdom. Based on ongoing research involving semi-structured interviews and a commissioned survey, which indicates that approximately 53% of contemporary funerals include grave goods, Riley identifies three dialectical tensions in post-death agency: individuality versus relationality, past versus present, and active versus passive. The study further emphasises how these objects are intertwined with the agency of the living, memory, and material and memorial objects, revealing the continuing significance of grave goods in contemporary funerary contexts.

Also focusing on materiality, **Simona Kuntarič Zupanc**'s paper, *Placemaking by the Dead: Cemeteries as Emotional, Moral and Ritual Places*, explores cemeteries and the spatial dimensions of continuing bonds with the dead. Based on nine months of anthropological fieldwork in north-eastern Slovenia, Kuntarič Zupanc investigates various

⁴ Tina Ivnik and Petra Hamer, eds., *The Agency of the Dead in the Lives of Individuals: Experience and Conceptualisation: DEAGENCY International Conference: Book of Abstracts*, Ljubljana: Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology, Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana, 2024.

⁵ In addition to this special issue, other conference papers were published in a special issue of the journal *Český lid / Czech Ethnological Journal*, <https://ceskylid.avcr.cz/cz/archives/113-1>.

practices of care and ritual intervention at graves, showing how the dead and the living co-produce these cemeteries as ambivalent spaces imbued with emotional and moral significance.

The next two articles draw on folklore archive materials to investigate changes in the relationship between the living and the dead, a topic also addressed by other articles in this issue. In *The Revenge of the Rejected – The Rise, Fall and Background Context of Icelandic Beliefs in Supernatural Family Followers*, **Terry Gunnell** investigates the Icelandic phenomenon of spirits attached to families, commonly known as “mórar” (peat-reds, male) and “skottur” (tasselled hats, female), using previously collected folkloristic materials and databases. Unlike spirits associated with buildings, these family-bound entities are often believed to arise from social rejection or the mistreatment of the poor, affecting successive generations. Gunnell provides an overview of the nature, distribution and apparent uniqueness of these legends, and explores why such beliefs are diminishing, though not entirely disappearing, in contemporary Icelandic society.

Dreams of the dead are perhaps the most common way in which the agency of the dead is manifested. However, individuals report various kinds of dreams of the dead, which are also interpreted differently, depending on broader cultural as well as individual understandings. As in the previous paper, the following contribution focuses on changes in traditional ideas and how they are disappearing or being reinterpreted in the contemporary world. In her paper, *Agency of the Dead in Dream Narratives: From Traditional Culture to (Post)modern Perspectives*, **Lina Būgienė** explores how understandings of dream narratives have changed over time. Analysing folklore material, she demonstrates that in traditional Lithuanian culture, the deceased who appeared in dreams usually did so to request something from the living, often to improve their condition in the afterlife. However, interpretations of dreams involving the dead have shifted in (post)modern times. In more contemporary folklore material, she concludes that such dreams are now more often understood in relation to the dreamer and their personal problems.

Kaarina Koski’s article also looks at dream encounters with the dead, but from the perspective of problematic family relationships. In her paper, *Deceased Parent in Distressing Dreams: Dealing with Problems in Bereavement Narratives*, she analyses the nightmarish dream narratives of three Finnish women involving their deceased parents and argues that, rather than indicating difficulties in coping with grief and loss, these dreams were the products of strained relationships. By reading these texts closely, she shows how the act of recounting such dream experiences enables the dreamers to transform their daughter-parent relationships into forms with which they feel more at ease.

The topic of family relationships continues in the next section of the special issue, which examines the role of the dead among individuals and groups involved in contemporary spirituality. As in the previous paper, **Tina Ivnik** examines how problematic relationships with deceased individuals who led immoral lives – usually family members – are reflected in encounters between the living and the dead. In her paper “Growth” vs. “Stuckness”: *Morality, the Afterlife and the Influence of the Deceased on the Living*, she examines these experiences in the context of afterlife conceptions amongst adherents of alternative spirituality in Bosnia and Herzegovina. She shows how moral frameworks shape ideas of

reincarnation, distinguishing between souls who continue to grow spiritually after death and act as positive influences on the living, and the “stuck dead” who require spiritual support and may exert a negative influence. Ivnik also underscores the contrast between alternative spiritualist understandings of the relationship with the dead and the region’s official religious and vernacular traditions.

Understood more broadly, questions of family and ancestors are also the subject matter of **Tatiana Bužeková’s** paper, *Lines of Descent in Alternative Spirituality: Experiencing the Agency of Ancestors through Spiritual Energy*. In this contribution, Bužeková examines how ancestors are understood as active agents in contemporary spiritual life, combining anthropological theory with ethnographic research among practitioners of urban shamanism and Wicca in Bratislava. It builds on earlier debates that frame ancestors as socially efficacious beings linked to descent, ritual and spiritual power, while emphasising that descent involves not only biological lineage but also the transmission of spiritual energy accessed through altered states of consciousness. Situating these ideas within the post-socialist growth of alternative spiritual movements in Europe, the study argues that experiences of ancestral agency are shaped by culturally specific notions of personhood: in urban spiritual milieus, descent mediates connections between the living and the dead through spiritual energy, while a strong emphasis on individual development reframes ancestral agency in morally essentialist terms.

The next paper, while still primarily examining bonds with deceased family members, shifts the focus to communication with the dead through mediums. In her article, *Why People Go to Mediums: Contexts, Motivations and Embodied Experience in Contemporary Hungary*, **Emese Ilyefalvi** provides an overview of a particular spiritualist technique – the use of a three-legged stool to convey messages from the dead – and examines the Hungarian clientele of its practitioners. Based on participant observation and both online and offline interviews with seers and their clients, she explores the motivations that lead people to consult seers after the death of loved ones. She argues that, besides being the conduit for messages between the living and the dead, the significance of this interactive technique lies in its capacity to provide an embodied, experiential sense of continuing bonds with the deceased.

The issue concludes with an examination of how the agency of the dead is experienced through art and popular culture across changing historical and social contexts. **Tomaž Simetinger** examines changes in spiritualist practices by looking closely at the process of creating artworks – specifically paintings – in collaboration with the dead. In his article, *Painting as Communication with the Deceased and Other Non-Human Beings*, he compares the creative practices of three different artists: two well-known historical figures in spiritualist painting, Georgiana Houghton and Hilma af Klint, and a contemporary Slovenian artist with whom he conducted interviews and used the method of participant observation to explore her mode of work. Using the theoretical framework of vernacular religion, he examines both the similarities and differences in their approaches to painting with the help of the dead. He concludes that the main difference lies in the hierarchical model of revelation and the subordination of the artist’s body in

historical cases, as opposed to the more relational and dialogical form of collaboration he found in his interlocutor's experience.

Aljaž Mesner's paper, *Modern-Day Kaidan: Japanese Horror Storytelling as Popular Culture*, also examines various forms of art and popular culture, focusing on *kaidan* (ghost stories) in both historical and contemporary contexts from a comparative approach. He traces the evolution of the Japanese horror storytelling tradition from its first widespread popularity in the Edo period, through the scepticism of the Meiji era, to its adaptation in 20th-century film and television. The paper pays particular attention to the 1990s, when *kaidan* entered the mainstream via J-Horror, television programmes, books and magazines, encouraging firsthand engagement with haunted locations. Mesner also highlights the recent resurgence of oral storytelling through competitions, live performances and themed bars, drawing on media analysis, field observations and interviews to explore these contemporary developments.

We hope readers will find this special issue both stimulating and rewarding, and that the articles prove to be enriching and insightful.

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Grave Goods and Dialectical Post-Death Agency in the Contemporary UK: Individual and Relational, Active and Passive, Past and Present

Jennifer Riley

Grave goods – that is, clothing and objects left with the deceased during burial or cremation, not subsequently easily retrievable by the living – can reveal a great deal about how the dead and their agency are conceptualized. While commonly associated with ancient funerary ritual, grave goods are also significant features in many UK funerals today, although they are not commonly talked about. Drawing on an ongoing multi-method study, this paper suggests that, in the contemporary UK context, wherein some 53% of funerals include grave goods, they reveal three dialectical tensions in post-death agency: individuality-relationality; past-present; and active-passive. They are also entwined with the agency of the living, of memory, and of material and memorial objects.

KEYWORDS: death, agency, grave goods, funerary ritual, UK, continuing bonds, dividuality, absence-presence

Grobni pridatki – torej oblačila in predmeti, položeni k pokojniku med pokopom ali upepelitvijo, ki jih živi pozneje ne morejo zlahka pridobiti nazaj – lahko razkrijejo veliko o tem, kako razumemo mrtve in njihovo delovanje. Čeprav jih navadno povezujemo z antičnimi pogrebnimi obredi, so grobni pridatki pomembna značilnost tudi številnih sodobnih pogrebov v Združenem kraljestvu, čeprav se o njih redko govori. Na podlagi obsežne raziskave, ki še poteka, članek pokaže, da v sodobnem britanskem kontekstu, kjer približno 53 % pogrebov vključuje grobne pridatke, ti razkrivajo tri dialektične napetosti v posmrtni delovalnosti: individualnost–odnosnost; preteklost–sedanjost; ter aktivnost–pasivnost. Hkrati so prepleteni tudi z dejavnostjo živih, spomina ter materialnih in spominskih predmetov.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: smrt, dejavnost, grobni pridatki, pogrebni obred, Združeno kraljestvo, nadaljevanje vezi, dividualnost, odsotnost–prisotnost

INTRODUCTION

Human identity, power and agency are enduring, entwined themes, demanding ongoing exploration across disciplines. As Woodthorpe (2010) suggests, this includes their intersections with death, dying, and memorialisation, not least in material and spatial forms. Grounding these “mega concepts” affords them “sensible actuality that makes it possible to think not only realistically and concretely about them, but /.../ creatively and imaginatively with them” (Woodthorpe, 2010: 224; see also Geertz, 1975: 23).

At its core, agency refers to the capacity to act and exert influence. In dominant framings such as Giddens' (1991), human agency entails independent actors deliberating and enacting decisions that shape their social and material environments (see Hockey, Komaromy, Woodthorpe, 2010: 9; Meese et al., 2015: 417–418; Hurtado, 2021: 4). For Giddens and others, exploring agency begets questions about what *limits* decision-making, activity, and influence.

Ostensibly, death significantly limits human agency. As Schwartz writes:

Human desire and intention reaches a stark impasse when it faces death, which always appears to us as something opposed to our own control or agency /.../ we are only at worst the bearers of death, whose arrival is always from without, otherwise than human, elsewhere, somewhere off stage. Death arrives, death takes us, death visits us, but even when we invite it, it is always a stranger who comes and goes at will. (Schwartz, 2013: 7)

Yet Schwartz, like others, challenges this presumed “impasse”, advocating more nuanced presentations (see, e.g., Williams, 2004; Harper, 2010; 2012), not least through explorations of death's materiality (Hockey, Komaromy, Woodthorpe, 2010: 9). Drawing on, for example, Latour (1993 [1983]) and Gell (1998), such scholarship stresses the complex intertwining of objects, environments, death and (post-death) agency. Hockey, Komaromy and Woodthorpe (2010: 9) thus describe “networks of human beings, inanimate objects and their surroundings /.../ as co-producers of meaning”. Some extend this, attributing agency to these objects and environments (Gell, 1998) prompting exploration of what Hallam and Hockey (2020: 14) call “transactions /.../ between the agency of persons and that of material objects” amid death.

Maddrell (2013) builds on these ideas, suggesting the “absent-present” dead have “paradoxical” agency (ibid.: 503, 517). “Absence-presence” traces to Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* (1956 [1953]). Upon arriving in a café, expecting to find his friend Pierre, Sartre is instead greeted by Pierre's absence. The resulting experience of “nothingness” – of “not Pierre” – is impactfully “haunting”. Similarly, Maddrell suggests, the absence of the dead demands response, and thus has agency of its own (2013: 505; see also Meyer, Woodthorpe, 2008). This “relational absence-presence” (Maddrell, 2013: 509) is often entangled with objects and landscapes (ibid.: 513) and affords “vitality” and agency to the dead: a “literal sense of continued ‘presence’ despite bodily and cognitive absence” (Maddrell, 2013: 505) with which the bereaved must negotiate.

This interplay of absence and agency is bound up with memory, whose complex relationship(s) with death and memorialization have been explored extensively. As Hallam and Hockey observe in *Death, Memory and Material Culture* (2020 [2001]) memories can, “of their own accord, intrude or depart” (2020: 113) bringing the past to the present. Quoting Sheringham, they describe memory as “lodg[ing] the past ‘in the present like a foreign body’” (Sheringham, 1993: 293 in Hallam, Hockey, 2020: 105). In this, memory has a powerful “degree of agency”, (Hallam, Hockey, 2020: 106) and can “disturb” the present (ibid.: 103, 114), evoking emotional responses and shaping social

realities (ibid.: 102), not least through physical, material phenomena. While memorials' "force" derives from their "association with the *past* life of the deceased" (ibid.: 122, *italics mine*) they enact this force "*in the present*" (ibid.: 102, *italics original*), disrupting memory's ostensibly past-facing orientation.

Post-death agency, then, is entwined and entangled: with the bereaved, memorial objects, environments, memory and pregnant absence. They might be said to have their own agency: object-agency, memory-agency, absence-agency, and so on. Following Langer (2010), we might differentiate between primary and secondary agency. Whereas the former is active, and typically allied to (living) persons, the latter is closer to the agency of "things" and "excludes the capacity to choose and the moral implications choice brings with it" (Langer, 2010: 86). Langer's explorations of inquests, however, suggest the dead shift between primary and secondary agency. This is important when exploring, for example, necrophilia, wherein – as Troyer (2008) notes – ascribing corpses (primary) agency problematically detracts from their inability to choose.

This paper explores agency, particularly the agency of the dead, in relation to contemporary UK "grave goods". It draws on the findings of ongoing study "Baggage for the Beyond", the first significant study of grave goods in this context: clothing and objects left with the deceased during burial or cremation, not subsequently easily retrievable by the living. Typically framed historically or archaeologically (Parker Pearson, 1999), this practice persists today (Harper, 2012; Härke, 2014) but attracts conspicuously little research, not least because of its hidden, private nature (Harper, 2012). They, too, are somewhat absent-present. Existing research has been small-scale and local (single establishments; particular migrant communities, e.g. Harper, 2012; Holloway et al., 2019). This small literature suggests, though, that they are shaped by contextual factors, motivations and meanings – much like their historic counterparts, yet not identically so (Brück, 2004; Harper, 2012; Härke, 2014; Davies, 2015). In considering what these grave goods reveal about the post-death agency of the deceased, this paper explores their entanglement with other forms of agency, and grave goods' own agency. Extending Maddrell's work on absence-presence, it argues that grave goods illuminate three dialectical tensions in post-death agency: individuality-relationality; past-present; and active-passive. In turn, reflecting on these might support researchers to explore these dynamisms of post-death agency in relation to other aspects of memorialization.

CONTEXT AND METHODOLOGY

It is difficult to summarise a "typical" UK funeral, not least insofar as the complexity of UK deathstyles matches the complexity of its cultural religious landscape (Riley et al., 2023). Practices also vary by area, and not least between its four constituent nations (England, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland). Until the late 20th century, Christian (and especially Anglican/Church of England) funerals dominated, even served as a default except where someone belonged to another specific religion (especially Islam, Judaism, Hinduism or Sikhism). This has changed dramatically in the 21st century. According to Rozario and Shimada:

[J]ust one in ten people now want a religious funeral. Today, most funerals are taken by independent civil celebrants – a trend that looks likely to continue as demand for religious services declines. Yet, celebrant-led funerals are not necessarily secular; at the request of the organiser, many incorporate spiritual or explicitly religious elements. (Rozario, Shimada, 2023: 49)

Such emphases on “organiser” requests, choice and personalization have become hugely important, a new UK funerary “default”. Incorporating symbols and signifiers of the deceased’s unique identity and life (upon which I expand below) has become a significant marker of “good” or “authentic” funerals, which are now widely framed as “celebrations of life” (SunLife, 2023; Rozario, Shimada, 2023). This can shape numerous funerary elements – from music, eulogy and flowers, to choice of coffin or disposal method – including, importantly, grave goods. That is not to say, however, that people are keen to make decisions in advance. While the number of people pre-purchasing or pre-planning funerals is growing, the vast majority are not: most funerals are bought and devised at the “point of need” (84.5% in 2019 – Competition and Markets Authority).

Cremation remains considerably more popular than burial (consistently, cremation is chosen in 75–80% cases), though natural burial has grown significantly in popularity since its introduction in the 1990s (Davies, Rumble, 2012). So-called “direct” cremation – in which there is no formal funeral service – is also growing in popularity (Rozario, Shimada, 2023: 48). Cremation and “natural burial” both have implications for those picking out grave goods, as some materials either cannot safely be cremated or are refused by natural burials sites on environmental grounds; for “conventional” cemetery or graveyard burial, and the interment of cremated remains, there are very few limitations.

“Baggage for the Beyond” is the first large-scale study of grave good practices in the contemporary UK. To build a broad yet detailed picture, it uses mixed methods, including a commissioned survey (YouGov, 2025) (n=2192, representative of UK adults, conducted online 27–28 March 2025). 53% of survey respondents had selected at least one grave good within the previous decade. Selecting from a list (including “Other: Please Specify”), the five most frequently selected were flowers (35%), clothing (19%), photographs (19%), letters, cards and notes (16%), and jewellery, watches and accessories (9%). However, this list masks the extraordinary variety of grave goods described in survey responses, interviews, and anecdotally: everything from dead pets and sex toys to potatoes, puzzles, mobile phones, and life-sized dolls. Moreover, interviews illustrated the importance not only of grave goods themselves, but of the decision-making process, and subsequent reflection.

This chapter draws primarily on the 29 semi-structured interviews completed at time of writing¹ with: bereaved individuals (14); professionals working in funeral care, celebrancy, cemetery and crematoria, and other death-related roles (10); and some speaking from both perspectives (5). Interviews aimed to gather in-depth insights into people’s experiences, decisions, and preferences regarding grave goods. Ethical approval was granted by University of Aberdeen’s ethical review committee for Arts, Social Sciences and Business (ID: 4710799).

¹ At time of writing, purposive recruitment is ongoing to increase sample diversity, particularly with regard to ethnicity and religion, to avoid unduly underrepresenting minority groups.

LOCATION	
England	19
Scotland	9
Wales	-
Northern Ireland	1
AGE	
18–25	-
25–29	3
30–34	2
35–39	-
40–44	5
45–49	2
50–54	2
55–59	4
60–64	4
65 and over	7
SEX	
Female	16
Male	13
RELIGION	
None	12
Buddhist	1
Christian (total)	10
Church of England/Anglican/Episcopal	4
Evangelical – Independent	3
Methodist	1
Presbyterian/Church of Scotland	2
Hindu	-
Jewish	2
Muslim	-
Sikh	-
Other	3
Prefer not to say	1
ETHNICITY	
White British/White English/White Scottish/White Irish	22
White – other	6
English–Israeli	1

Table 1: Interview sample demographics at time of writing (Data provided by the author)

Participants were recruited through opportunistic and carefully managed snowball sampling. Recruitment took place via adverts in professional newsletters, social media, word of mouth, and through community and professional gatekeepers. For practical and environmental reasons, interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams. All names are pseudonyms.

- Grave goods you've picked out – or others have picked out – and the stories behind them
- The process of deciding which grave goods (if any) to pick – whose insights are in the mix?
- Motivations and deliberations when picking grave goods
- Any concerns or nervousness about picking grave goods (in general or in particular)
- The impact grave goods have on the bereaved (short-term when experiencing acute grief, as well as longer term)
- Anything else relating to grave goods you'd like to cover

Figure 1: List of interview topics provided in advance to interviewees (Supplied by the author)

Interviews deliberately had a conversational tone and flexible structure, on account of the subject matter's sensitivity, and to allow participants to guide discussion and shape the interview, elevating them as experts on their own experiences (Riley, 2022: 159; see also, e.g., Davies, 2008; Guillemin, Drew, 2010; Schielke, Debevec, 2012; Radford, 2022). Participants were sent a list of suggested themes beforehand, to reflect upon if they wished, with the caveat that preparation was neither *expected* nor necessary (Figure 1).

Interviews were transcribed verbatim by a professional transcriber, and analysed in NVivo12, combining qualitative thematic coding with critical close reading. This approach followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis principles, working iteratively, coding both purposively and inductively. Codes were grouped under five headings: A) Grave Goods; B) Death Attitudes and Norms; C) Other Aspects of Mourning and Memorial; D) Project Interests; and E) Interviewee Information. Data coded at four themes was particularly important in developing the present paper:

- Grave Goods "Why" – Motivations (A)
- Grave Goods' Effects (A)
- Grave Goods Decision Making – Who, When, How (A)
- Ludism and Irrationality² (D)

The findings below are grouped under three headings, each of which is presented as a two-word dialectic: individual-relational, past-present, and active-passive. All three trace recurring tensions and ambivalences through participants' experiences, understandings and discussions. While grouped thus for ease of reading, these dialectics are

² As I expand elsewhere (Riley, forthcoming) ludism is "perfectly serious and potentially transformative meaning-making through dealing simultaneously in two or more ways of classifying reality, and characterised by openness, even hopefulness". Those moments where participants considered the "irrationality" of, for example, leaving objects with the dead – became a specific project interest before interview analysis began, and were thus incorporated as a purposive code.

not discrete categories, but overlapping dynamics through which post-death agency is negotiated in relation to the living, memory and material objects. Together, they provide a framework for understanding grave goods as sites where post-death agency is variously afforded, enacted, constrained and transformed. In the same way that “absence-presence” (Maddrell, 2013) has become a widespread discourse and analytical framing in death studies, the discussion then proposes that these three additional dialectics might be valuable tools supporting critical reflection upon the ways in which post-death agency, presence and identity are navigated, negotiated, constrained and contingent.

FINDINGS

Individual-Relational

Asked what might motivate people to leave grave goods, Vanessa explained: *“it was multi-layered, I would say /.../ There’s never one reason why people are doing something”* (Vanessa, 2025). Similarly, funeral director Jessica suspected people *“probably can’t tell you what they want to achieve by grave goods /.../ [there] might be part of it that they don’t realise /.../ or that they aren’t articulating”* (Jessica, 2024).

Interviewees thus echoed analyses of historic (Härke, 2014) and contemporary (Harper, 2012) grave goods, suggesting motivations might be both multiple and opaque. Nevertheless, reflecting individual identity was a persistent intention: participants picked grave goods which captured some facet of the deceased – their biography, loved ones, interests, quirks, passions, or personality. The words “personal”, “favourite”, “close”, and “familiar” were widespread as interviewees explained their motivations. As Jessica put it, *“the whole point of it is that it is something personal”* (Jessica, 2024).

This emphasis on individuality was especially apparent in relation to clothing and appearance. Many interviewees felt it important that the dead wear things they “liked”, felt “good” or “comfortable” in, and “would have wanted”, ensuring they “looked like themselves”. This echoes Harper’s (2012) comparative study of grave goods in one North American and one UK funeral directing establishment: selected objects were typically “significant to the deceased, or [were] considered to represent the deceased’s identity” (Harper, 2012: 50).

This reflects a broader trend in the UK (and beyond – see Emke, 2002; Bremborg, 2006; Schäfer, 2007; Knopke, 2020) towards funerary personalization, which has deep-set origins. For example, the growing normative preference for individual (as opposed to mass or family) burials since the 17th and, especially, 19th and 20th centuries both reflected and reinforced this association; it was then extended to modern cremation (legalized in the late Victorian era), allying death and post-death agency to individual, not shared, spaces (Rugg, Parsons, 2018: 129; see also Gittings, 1984; Farrow, 2024; King, 2025). Nowadays, individual burial or cremation is the presumed default:³ the accidental

³ Burying/cremating people (e.g. mothers and babies) together is not unheard of or illegal, but requires negotiation and specific permission. By contrast, babies/“pregnancy remains” miscarried before 24 weeks’ gestation are, by default, buried or cremated in groups.

mixing of ashes or remains attracts moral concern. Beginning in the 1970s (Pine, Philips, 1970; Hyland, Morse, 1995; Walter, 1996; Howarth, 1999) personalization has become particularly significant since the millennium, using immaterial and material elements to centralize the “life and character” of the deceased (Caswell, 2011; Walter, 2017).

Grave goods thus worked in the manner of ritual symbols, as famously conceptualized by Turner. First formulated in *The Forest of Symbols*, Turner (1970) suggested symbols function by condensing meaning into (often) material forms. These forms’ meanings have two “poles”: ideological and sensory, respectively evoking desires and feelings, and norms and values (see also Uhrin, 2020) for those with the hermeneutic and understanding to interpret them. Grave goods condense individual identity and personality, reflecting the social value placed on individuality in UK life and death. Following Davies (2017: 4) we might also see them as “words against death”, material means of asserting life’s value when faced with death.

As Davies highlights, however, “words against death” are profoundly socially-orientated, reflecting the dead as members of social groups, such that “having encountered and overcome this experience [death] both the individual and society are transformed and gain a sense of power which motivates ongoing life” (Davies, 2017: 4). In *Natural Burial* (Davies, Rumble, 2012) he argues that it becomes very difficult “to think in terms of some discrete autonomy of isolated persons, and much more realistic to acknowledge individuals as part of a variety of social networks and webs” (ibid.: 7) when exploring this form of disposition. Davies and Rumble thus reject “radical individualism of autonomous persons” (ibid.: 9) instead emphasising entanglement and connectedness.

It is similarly difficult to think of grave goods as tied solely to “discrete autonomy of isolated persons”. In part, this is because grave goods are typically selected by others.⁴ As funeral director Hannah noted, “*relatives pick what they think their loved one would have wanted*” (Hannah, 2025). Harry selected items that “*would have made [my daughter] smile /.../ that we thought she would have liked*”, but that “*as usual with death, the dead actually get no say*” (Harry, 2024). In this, grave goods might be likened to colonial memorials, described by Holloway et al. (2019: 23) as “tool[s] for displaying identity” whereby “it was largely those left behind whose agency determined what was recorded”.

Moreover, many grave goods symbolised relationships and relationality. Vanessa described them as “*token[s] of the relationship*”; Maria as a way of “*symbolis[ing] that love*” (Vanessa, 2025; Maria, 2025); Protestant minister Robert as a way of “*consolidat[ing] that person’s love, attachment*” (Robert, 2025). Particularly with children, Robert suggested, grave goods extended caregiving: “*you want to envelop them in the eternal hug /.../ [that’s] the purest motivation*” (Robert, 2025). Funeral director Heather echoed this, suggesting they allowed mourners “*to carry on giving that care for as long as they can*” (Heather, 2024). Heather also shared the story of a woman who placed a potato in her husband’s coffin to symbolise their relationship: “*they’d met when they*

⁴ There are exceptions. Some do leave instructions about their grave goods – especially clothing. The YouGov survey (2025, see above) suggests maybe 3% of people leave such plans – but where they do, in Hallam and Hockey’s terms (2020), this affords “considerable post-mortem agency”, albeit deeply socially entangled, being dependent upon the adherence of the living.

were potato picking in Ireland, and he had attracted her attention by throwing a potato at her” (Heather, 2024). Kirsten left two books with her dad that he had read as a child and, later, to his children: “*I just love the fact that they are a personal touch /.../ that signifies that we knew him and we loved him*” (Kirsten, 2025).

Relationality was keenly important when people’s ashes were co-mingled or interred together. More commonly, photographs – among the most common grave goods – were used to reflect relationships, often showing the dead with loved ones. William buried his mother with a photo of his late father: it was “*the right thing to do, because Mum deeply missed Dad*” (William, 2024). Cathy’s mother-in-law’s coffin contained “*three roses /.../ from [her] three boys*” (Cathy, 2024). Letters, similarly, evoked relationship and interpersonal connection and communication. Like photographs and poems, they were described as “reminders” to the deceased: Laura cremated her grandfather with the poem she wrote for and read at his funeral, “*because I wanted him to have something that he would be reminded of me*” (Laura, 2025). These examples closely evoke the language and logic of “continuing bonds” grief models, which frame maintaining ongoing relationships with the dead as natural and beneficial (Klass et al., 1996; Swan, 2021; Hewson et al., 2023; Swan, 2024).

Mauss’ (1925) “gift theory” proposes that the exchange of “gifts” creates social force and bonds that sustain social life. Recalling both Mauss’ alienable and inalienable types, grave goods extend this beyond death, into continuing bonds. Framed as alienable gifts, grave goods echoed patterns of reciprocal exchange. Indeed, like Swan suggests (2021; 2024) some participants described grave goods as “gifts”, and some literally were: as Heather explained, “*We’ve had birthday cards, we’ve had Valentine’s cards. Things that you wanted to give to somebody when they were alive, you don’t stop wanting to give them to them*” (Heather, 2024). Beth’s grandmother was buried with knitted slippers, which she had regularly made as gifts: “*it was a family tradition, she would knit them all year round /.../ so my aunt absolutely put a pair of pea shoes on her feet*” (Beth, 2024). Grave goods also functioned as inalienable gifts, objects with sentimental, emotional value and force which reinforce kinship bonds, and confer a sense of relational identity (Mauss, 1925; see also Davies, 2015: 45–46).

Grave goods also illustrate the entanglement of identity with material objects. This entanglement has been widely discussed across disciplines, including studies of displacement: Parkin (1999: 304) observed that refugees carrying “articles of sentimental value which both inscribe and are inscribed by their own memories of self and personhood”. While suggesting that “material objects possess forms of agency” clashes with “prevalent Western distinction[s] made between animate and inanimate entities” Hallam and Hockey (2020: 114) identify such “distributed personhood” in material manifestations of death, dying and memorializing. They observe that objects

can be pressed into service as a focus for present and future remembering /.../ the deliberate selection and management of these materials is achieved through the exercise of human agency. (Hallam, Hockey, 2020: 117–118)

In this, material objects “can become extensions of the body and therefore of personhood” (ibid.: 43). Similarly, Harper noted that some grave goods read as “extensions” of the deceased which “embodied their history, identity and relationships” (Harper, 2012: 50), becoming “inalienable property /.../ inextricably bound to his identity and personhood” (ibid.: 56). Interviewees echoed these suggestions. Heather suggested some objects were “*bound in the family’s minds with the identity of the person*”, indeed

so closely wound up with the person’s perception of the person that’s died that they can’t imagine them without it. /.../ It seems to be the case that that thing is inalienably theirs, and it would be wrong to take it away from them. (Heather, 2024)

Humanist celebrant Mark recalled checking repeatedly that a client was happy for her dad’s hat to be cremated with him. She responded, resolutely, “*No, it’s **got** to go with Dad*” (Mark, 2025), a marker of its intimate association and intertwining with his identity.

“Distributed personhood” was particularly evident with items worn regularly and closely to the body: glasses, watches and jewellery. Items like glasses, pacemakers and bodily metalwork facilitate and enhance people’s agency in life: leaving them in place in death perhaps symbolises the continued enablement of that agency. Vanessa suggested wedding rings, glasses and clothing “*become part of the body [and] cease to be a material object*”. She noted, “[*If*] *my grandmother, particularly, hadn’t had her glasses on, then it wouldn’t have been her*” (Vanessa, 2025). Similarly, Robert differentiated between food, which could be bought specifically as grave goods, and items like “*a necklace or a ring /.../ that has been handled, has been loved, has been worn*” (Robert, 2024). He noted, though, that this closeness and distributed personhood were precisely why some retained such jewellery, so as not to additionally or further “lose” the deceased. Grave goods also represented the distributed personhood of the living: as noted above, they function as something *of the living* by which the *dead* might “be reminded of” them and know that they were – are – loved, sending or leaving a part of themselves with their departed loved one.

Grave goods thus evoke both uniquely individual and profoundly relational identity, entangled in kinship ties and human-material bonds. This aligns with the notion of dividual personhood. Davies (2020) has advocated dividual approaches to death studies. Drawing on anthropological work in India (Marriott, 1976) and Melanesia (Strathern, 1988), dividual models of identity were developed in contrast to dominant Western conceptualizations, instead framing identity as porous, relational, and constituted through exchange:

[In place of] the image of a firmly bounded and almost insular person [this is] one who is much less bounded and much more open to the being, influence, presence and participation of others /.../ Dividual personhood describes someone whose boundaries with others and the wider environment must be considered as selectively open for a variety of ‘flows’ of materials, relations and the emotions that constitute personhood. (Davies, 2020: 4)

Grave goods illuminate the value of this relational model.

Past-Present

Christopher and Alisdair echoed many of the above observations concerning grave goods, individual identity, relationality, ongoing “continuing bonds” and continued caregiving. Death professional Christopher suggested “*it’s [grave goods are] about that lasting memory of that person /.../ that connection, that love, and knowing that they’re still with them*” (Christopher, 2025). Healthcare chaplain Alisdair also closely juxtaposed these themes:

[It’s] the idea of a personality, of something being there with them that they loved, and defining them rather than just being another body in the ground /.../ that sense that something else is with them or they’re always thinking of them /.../ it helps them [relatives] to know that they’re connected /.../ that they’ve looked after them. (Alisdair, 2025)

He provided some grave goods to specifically evoke and literalise ongoing connection:

[For] any child that dies in the hospital, we’ll speak with their siblings, and we give them these elephants. So, each sibling gets an elephant, and [one] goes with the child who’s died. The story behind that is mainly that elephants never forget, and you never forget your loved one /.../ Then at [the hospice], if anyone has any grandchildren or any children /.../ I’ll offer this to them [too]. [It’s about] always knowing that that person never goes away, that that person’s always there for you /.../ there’s that invisible string between the elephants, that when I’m holding this elephant, I’m holding my dad or my mum or my gran. (Alisdair, 2025)

Evoking such continued relationships, grave goods thus extend the dead’s presence, influence and agency in the present. This continuity, however, must be held in tension with a strongly *past* orientation. Many participants situated the dead’s activity and agency firmly in the past, stressing that they were now “dead” and unable to perceive grave goods. For example, Elly initially reacted to the suggestion that she might write a letter for her daughter’s coffin by thinking “*that’s silly, you know, like why would I do that? Like, she’s not going to read it!*” (Elly, 2024). Kirsten said the same of the books in her dad’s coffin: “*I don’t feel like he’s reading them or anything like that!*” (Kirsten, 2025). Harry was clear: his daughter “*was dead*” (Harry, 2024); worrying about the dead being “*too cold*” was irrational. Jessica described clients leaving biscuits and chocolate with the dead, and asking “*if that’s silly*” since “*we know that it’s not going to transmogrify /.../ know that that person is not going to eat that biscuit*” (Jessica, 2024). Importantly, though, many of these interviewees and their clients had nevertheless picked out grave goods, finding them meaningful and valuable: as Jessica put it, “*it’s not rational, but that doesn’t mean it’s not the right thing for them to do*” (Jessica, 2024). Elsewhere, I have presented this dynamic as “ludic” simultaneously entertaining two versions of reality (Riley, forthcoming). For our present purposes, it illustrates a past-yet-present quality afforded to the dead.

Correspondingly, some participants described grave goods as tools for “closure”, and “moving on”. Heather noted that some left grave goods when last visiting someone’s body: the point “*when what is in the coffin ceases to be their husband or their mother /.../ That [grave good] is the token, that is the final, ‘right, we’re going now’*” (Heather, 2024). Cathy described them as “*part of the goodbye /.../ I think grave goods are important, because it does give people a sense of closure*” (Cathy, 2024).

In this vein, many echoed Emke’s (2002) suggestion that “the ‘function’ of funerals [is framed] generally in terms of what they do for the living, not for the deceased” (Emke, 2002: 273), suggesting grave goods were principally “for the living”, what Harry called a “*comfort for us*” (Harry, 2024). As Vanessa put it, they were “*more /.../ comforting for the living than comforting for the dead, aren’t they? Even though the living might be imagining they’re comforting for the dead*” (Vanessa, 2025). Curiously, Steven mixed past- and present-orientations, describing grave goods as “*final goodbyes*” yet as signs that “*that person’s not out of mind, they’re just out of sight*” (Steven, 2025). This duality reflects both “continuing bonds” and 20th-century “attachment and loss” models, closely associated with Freud (1917) and Bowlby (1969–1980) wherein grief involves severing ties with the deceased and must be overcome by “letting go”. These models afford the dead little agency, restricting them to the past. Grave goods evoke both models, holding past- and present-orientations in tension.

In this way, grave goods epitomize Woodthorpe’s (2010) claim that material memorials are “powerful tool[s] in terms of identity (re)formation, through the merging of mementoes and objects with memories of the deceased person, and a life-once-lived” (Woodthorpe, 2010: 122). Similarly, grave goods reflect what Davies (2015; 2017) has called “*retrospective* fulfilment of identity” in contemporary UK deathways. Whereas historically, Christian churches emphasized “*eschatological* fulfilment of identity” (Davies, 2017: 162–163), twentieth century secularisation had encouraged emphasis on “*this-worldly* fulfilment of life through human relationships, rewarding work and leisure” (ibid.), manifest in, for example, personalized funerals and ash dispersal at sites which encapsulate the deceased’s affections and biography, forming “*physical memories*” (ibid.) and emphasising “*earthly life /.../ a sense of the significance of the life that is ended /.../ rooted [in] the deceased person’s former life as now presented to the imaginative memory of mourners*” (ibid.: 256).

Davies’ language — “*a life that is ended*”, “*the deceased person’s former life*” — echoes Woodthorpe’s “*life-once-lived*”. Yet, counteracting this stark backwards-orientation, both Woodthorpe and Davies also refer to memory: the “*imaginative memory of mourners*” (Davies, 2015: 256). As noted above, memory is not singularly or straightforwardly past-oriented (Hallam, Hockey, 2020: 114). Rather, memory-agency affords past lives present force (ibid.: 102, 122) which may be welcome or unwelcome. Wojtkowiak and Venbrux (2009; 2010) have suggested that home memorials — typically assemblages of photographs, candles and small personal possessions — create “*ritual space for mourning and remembering [and] continuing bonds with the dead*” (2010: 234). Hockey, Komaromy and Woodthorpe (2010: 231) have similarly explored the object-agency of roadside memorials, noting their “*prompting power*” may prompt unwanted mortal reflections.

As we have seen, some grave goods have “living” or retained counterparts – the second half of a keyring, a matching elephant or bear. Others have living *equivalents* which may trigger memories – a corresponding wedding ring, similar home-made item, or favourite kind of food seen in a shop. Some retain images in which objects that are now grave goods feature (or, much more uncommonly, take photographs of someone in their coffin alongside their grave goods). These visible examples may have “prompting power” and object-agency akin to home or roadside memorials⁷. But many grave goods are invisible. Ostensibly, this reduces their object-agency and capacity to “disturb” the present. Indeed, some participants could not recall what they had selected; and others deliberately chose to inter belongings to limit present reminders. Funeral professional Steven described a client who buried many of his wife’s clothes and wedding rings, partly because they were “hers”, but also *“I can’t have it about, because I’ll see it. I don’t want to see it”* (Steven, 2025).

Conversely, some chose to retain certain items precisely to prompt memory. As neonatal nurse Maria explained, in her experience, parents of stillborn children fell into two categories:

I’ve seen both sides, I’ve seen parents /.../ take everything that they can home, because they will be holding onto their memories and to their smell and stuff, and I see other parents that want the baby to have the blanket /.../ for comfort, because they don’t want the baby to be by themselves. (Maria, 2025)

Visibly absent grave goods could still, though, demonstrate object-agency and memory-agency, rendering the dead present and affording them absent-present agency in turn. For example, spending time at her mother’s graveside prompted reflection on the objects Joanne and her siblings selected to go in her coffin – including a special necklace, photographs and her grandchildren’s drawings – and thus on her mother:

When I go up to her graveside and I put flowers down, I know she’s not on her own in that box. I know she’s got things with her that are from her family. And yeah, I suppose that was part of it, because when that lid closed, she wasn’t on her own. She had things with her /.../ She was so pretty. If I think about her funeral, or if I think about that time /.../ it’s as though it just happened yesterday. It’s so vivid in my mind. (Joanne, 2024)

Like other richly symbolic material mourning objects, grave goods can “trigger” embodied responses, which “in turn, transform the significance of material objects as the process unfolds”, a cycle of meaning, memorial and materiality with its own dynamism (Hallam, Hockey, 2020: 11; see also Williams, 2004; Harper, 2010; Schwarz, 2013). They render the dead present even as they mark a life that has ended, affording the dead present significance, presence and agency, which will extend to the future: “people’s perceptions of the past are reworked in the context of the present and in anticipation of the future” (Hallam, Hockey, 2020: 3).

Active-Passive

Just as Hallam and Hockey (2020) observe that memory is not strictly past-oriented, they also stress that it is dynamic, with an evolving present- and future-orientation. This contrasts with popular notions that memories are “things”:

... we ‘keep’ and ‘preserve’ /.../ as though they are objects in a personal museum [which] we choose when to disclose or display [and] are, therefore, associated with individual agency /.../ we imagine ourselves to be /.../ ‘in control’ /.../ While they are attributed something approximating an object status, memories are also routinely regarded as ‘static’, as imprints retained and fixed /.../ that a memory and the experience it arises out of are identical. (Hallam, Hockey, 2020: 3)

Contrastingly, Hallam and Hockey state clearly what many only “dimly” perceive, and may find troubling: that “memories cannot be conflated with actuality” (2020: 24). In turn, since the “recovery of the dead as social (if not physically present) agents” takes place through memory/ies, these are “open memories”, subject to “retrospective reconstruction” (ibid.).

Altena’s work (2009) on funerary films – both of funerals (documentaries) and those portraying the dead – reflects and expands on this. Both film types “consist of elaborate compilations of objects, images and words /.../ supposed to symbolise the deceased person’s identity” (Altena, 2009: 170), and filmmakers claim “both /.../ are alike reflections of the deceased’s identity” (ibid.: 159) and “true to life” (ibid.: 164). Altena, though, argues they are “constructed”, “shaped according to what the bereaved thought ‘fitting’” (ibid.), belying conflation of “identity and memory”, considered “so closely intertwined, they are presented as one and the same” (ibid.). Yet they are not: in both films and memories, “[l]ike pieces of a quilt, the visible traces of someone’s life are reconstructed as a coherent story” (ibid.: 165). Walter (1996: 7) has made similar observations of personalized funerals: they help the bereaved to “integrate the memory of the deceased into their ongoing lives”, affording the dead active ongoing presence; but *the bereaved* design them, reflecting *their* evolving version of the deceased’s identity.

Participants saw grave goods as reflections of changing relationships. As above, some were considered markers of “closure”, the fundamental changes to identity and relationships presented by death. For others, grave goods’ meanings and their relationships with them changed with time, mirroring shifting relationships with both the dead and their memories. When their daughter was stillborn, hospital staff provided grave goods to Elly and her husband: a two-part keyring and two matching bears, whereby “*one of it stays with the baby, and one of it is for us to keep*” (Elly, 2024). Initially, Elly felt “*they didn’t mean a lot to me specifically*”, but she included them, concerned she might “*regret*” not doing so (Elly, 2024). With time, she found these material “*tie[s] to the body*” gained meaningfulness – “*more than I expected*” (Elly, 2024). Similarly, as time passed following his daughter’s death, Harry (2024) explained “*things have become clearer, like a fog’s maybe lifted /.../ if you’d asked me then [i.e. immediately after her death] I wouldn’t have*

understood, and I wouldn't have remembered" her grave goods and their significance. But as his grief became less "*close*" they became "*comforting*"; they "*made me smile*" (Harry, 2024). Memories, once troubling, had shifted in place and potency.

Grave goods' significance, like memory, is therefore not static. Their meaningfulness can change with time, and with them their attendant memories and the place of the dead in the ongoing lives of the living. In this sense, grave goods evoke not only "continuing" but also "transforming bonds". As Mathijssen (2018: 218) explains, this framework emphasises that "both the relationship as well as the social location of the bereaved and the deceased are gradually altered". Maddrell (2010; 2013) has similarly observed how material and spatial mourning enable the living to negotiate "*evolving* relation to the absence-presence of the deceased and the places associated with them" (Maddrell, Sidaway, 2010: 22–23).

By reflecting and shaping transforming bonds, grave goods grant the dead continuing presence, significance and agency which evolve and are thus, in some senses, active. Equally, though, this ongoing transformation also reveals the dead's dependence on the living; their ongoing agency is thus contingent and somewhat passive. Such dependence and dual activity-passivity also appear in studies of memorialization. For example, Recuber (2021) has explored the "double victimization" of Black men and women killed by USA police, whose deaths are subsequently broadcast online: their presence remains, yet they lose "not only their lives but also the agency to define themselves and the ways they'd like to be remembered" (Recuber, 2021: 684). Caswell and O'Connor's (2015) work on dying alone also reflects active-passive agency. Against the normative grain of contemporary UK constructions of a "good death", dying alone may reflect the exercise of individual "agency, of a social actor who is able to make independent decisions and enact them" (Caswell, O'Connor, 2015: 3). Yet, post-death, this agency can be defied and denied. Using the example of Mr Jackson, who chose to die alone, they note:

[a]fter his death [he] was subject to processes which revived his social life, with no input from him and without consideration to his wishes. Mr Jackson exhibited agency during his life time, but lost the power to exercise choice after undergoing a lone death. (Ibid: 2)

In a similar way, some interviewees had chosen grave goods which they suspected the dead might not straightforwardly have wanted or have chosen themselves. Kate, for example, put her sister's ashes in her mum's coffin. Unable to agree about dispersal when her sister had died twenty years previously, Kate felt this "*finally /.../ reunited*" them, giving both a "*final resting place*" (Kate, 2024). On the one hand, it felt "*nice for them to be together in that coffin*", a representation of their relationship. Yet it was also

... cheeky in a way /.../ They didn't always get on as well as they could have done. So, in a way, it was quite funny to stick them both in the same coffin, because it's almost like if they were people, they'd have to get on /.../ Now you're stuck there now forever. Perpetuity and perpetuity. (Kate, 2024)

Vanessa's mother had dementia for several years before she died. During her illness, she

started carrying around a cuddly monkey /.../ one of my soft toys from when I was a child /.../ he became known as Charlie. And he went with her everywhere. And so when she died, he was on the bed with her /.../ And I said, "Charlie's to go with her". (Vanessa, 2025)

In some ways, this felt "*appropriate*" to Vanessa, and meant she could avoid "*fac[ing] what to do with Charlie*" (Vanessa, 2025). Equally, "*looking back on it, [with] the distance of time, I'm thinking goodness – she'd have hated being buried with a teddy!*" This incongruity worked as a prompt, rendering her mother present: "*I'm imagining [her] thinking 'Well, why did you do that?'*" (Vanessa, 2025).

These grave goods were personal and relational, yet incongruous and perhaps unwelcome, highlighting the relative passivity of the dead, contrasted to the decision-making power of the living. Following Langer (2010), they both afford the dead *secondary* agency, which "excludes the capacity to choose" (Langer, 2010: 86) how they are remembered, even as they render them active. Their activity is enacted insofar as they are passive. This recalls Parrott's work on collections belonging to the dead (2011). While displaying their collections mean they are "given agency, immortalised and remembered through collections" (Parrott, 2011: 292), Parrott's passive language – *given agency* – reinforces her observation that these "mnemonic connections" can undergo "transformations" as the living interact with them (ibid.: 289). Though people may prepare their collections before their death, they will ultimately have to hand over control, revealing "the potential contradictions of securing future remembrance" (ibid.).

DISCUSSION

Together, the three dialectical tensions identified in this paper – individual-relational, past-present, and active-passive – present grave goods as a funerary and memorial practice through which post-death agency is negotiated, distributed and, at times, constrained. Grave goods are anchors for continuing bonds, memory and memorialization, but their selection, typically, by those closest to the deceased means the living manage the dead's social afterlives, prioritising, fixing (and, correspondingly, excluding or deprioritising) particular narratives, relationships or facets. They allow the dead to remain present, but not fully participatory, tied elastically to the past; active, but not straightforwardly agentic; individual, but in a state of managed dependence on others. Grave goods exemplify secondary agency: the dead exert ongoing influence through memory, absence and material association, but are contingent upon the interpretive and curatorial labour of the living.

This has important implications for how we understand post-death agency. Rather than asking whether the dead *have* agency, this paper suggests we should ask how it is *allocated, mediated and negotiated*, not least materially. Like Maddrell's (2013) now-familiar suggestion that the dead are rendered absent-present through material and spatial

memorialising, this invites explorations of post-death agency as relational, temporal and unevenly distributed. It advances this conversation by suggesting three additional dialectics, both entangled with one another and, independently, a valuable analytical tool. Moreover, these dialectics are grounded in a remarkably widespread aspect of UK funerary culture which has hitherto received very little academic attention or popular discourse: it is commonplace yet concealed. This might prompt further reflection on why *the practice itself* is dialectically absent-present.

By foregrounding grave goods as convergence points for memory, materiality and agency, this paper argues for their significance within contemporary death studies, and their clear value as a case study for reflection by both academics and death professionals. An intimate practice framed by policy and regulation, grave goods also reveal how post-death agency is socially regulated (Macpherson et al., forthcoming). Decisions are shaped by crematoria rules, environmental discourses, professional norms and moral sensibilities as well as personal and familial preferences. They are thus points at which private memory intersects with institutional authority and cultural expectations about what constitutes an appropriate relationship with the dead. Paying attention to these practices which are both common, yet hidden, might prove deeply revealing of how death is lived with and managed in the present.

CONCLUSIONS

This article has explored contemporary UK “grave goods”, objects placed with the dead in burial or cremation, which cannot be subsequently retrieved. Selecting and reflecting upon grave goods is an important practice for a significant proportion of people in the UK, intertwining mourning, memory and materiality. Interviewees presented grave goods as “personal” symbols and material extensions of identity, capturing the unique, individual dead. Yet they were also deeply relational. Chosen largely by the bereaved, they often symbolised enduring bonds, love, and care. In Mauss’ (1925) terms, they functioned as both alienable and inalienable gifts, reinforcing kinship ties and continuing emotional connection beyond death. They thus epitomise interconnected, “dividual” post-death personhood.

Grave goods also situate the dead in both past and present. Though allied to “closure” and “moving on”, locating the dead in the past, both memories of grave goods and the memories they evoked granted them ongoing significance and space in the lives of the living. They thus epitomise Scarre’s (2007) observation that, in death and memorialisation: “our own efforts interlock with those of other people in complex patterns of agency that do not come to an end as soon as we do. In fact /.../ there is little that we do that ever becomes ‘purely past’” (Scarre, 2007: 43). This “interlocking” rendered the dead both active and passive. Grave goods afforded the deceased secondary agency: they remained influential, yet fundamentally dependent on the living for their symbolic activation and memorialisation. Their significance shifted with time, evoking both continuing and *transforming* bonds, facilitating an ongoing recalibration of meaning, memory, and identity.

Grave goods thus illustrate complex, layered interplay of (post-death) agency, identity, memory and materiality. Where Maddrell and others have explored mourning, material culture and memory in terms of “absence-presence”, this article proposes that post-death agency can also be understood in terms of three further dialectics: individual-relational; past-present; and active-passive. Future research might, as Woodthorpe (2010: 224) invites, consider whether and how well each of these illuminates other aspects of death’s materiality, facilitating concrete but creative exploration.

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GRABBEIGABEN UND DIALEKTISCHE POST-DEATH-AGENTUR IM HEUTIGEN GROSSBRITANNIEN: INDIVIDUELL UND RELATIONAL, AKTIV UND PASSIV, VERGANGENHEIT UND GEGENWART

Wie die Forschung gezeigt hat, gibt es ein komplexes Zusammenspiel zwischen menschlicher Identität, Macht und Entscheidungsfreiheit – insbesondere im Kontext von Tod, Sterben und Gedenken. Nach traditionellem Verständnis ist Entscheidungsfreiheit die Fähigkeit einer lebenden Person zu handeln und Entscheidungen zu treffen (z. B. Giddens, 1990). Daher wird der Tod oft als Begrenzung dieser Handlungsfähigkeit angesehen. Neuere wissenschaftliche Erkenntnisse haben diese Annahme jedoch in Frage gestellt und auf viele Arten hingewiesen, in denen die Toten durch Erinnerungen, Objekte und Orte weiterhin Einfluss ausüben.

Um die Literatur zu den Auswirkungen nach dem Tod und ihrer Komplexität zu erweitern, stützt sich dieser Artikel auf die erste große Studie über zeitgenössische britische Grabbeigaben – Kleidung und Gegenstände, die bei dem Verstorbenen während der Beerdigung oder Einäscherung zurückgelassen wurden und die später von den Lebenden nicht einfach zurückgeholt werden können. Durch die Untersuchung dieser Objekte identifiziert der Artikel drei Dialektische Spannungen in der Handlungsfähigkeit nach dem Tod: Individualität/Relationalität, Vergangenheit/Gegenwart und Aktiv/Passiv.

Während früher christliche Beerdigungen die Regel waren, werden die meisten modernen Beerdigungen im Vereinigten Königreich heute von zivilen Zelebranten geleitet, oft sehr individuell und als „Feiern des Lebens“ gestaltet. Personalisierung ist für das, was heute als „gute“ Beerdigung gilt, von zentraler Bedeutung geworden und beeinflusst Elemente wie Musik, Lesungen und Grabbeigaben. Die Einäscherung ist nach wie vor die beliebteste Methode der Leichenbestattung, obwohl die natürliche Bestattung und die direkte Einäscherung immer häufiger vorkommen und jeweils Auswirkungen auf Grabbeigaben haben.

Für die Forschung wurden verschiedene Methoden verwendet: eine repräsentative Umfrage, Dokumentenanalyse, halbstrukturierte Einbindung und halbstrukturierte Interviews. Die Forschung stützt sich in erster Linie auf die bisher durchgeführten 29 halbstrukturierten Interviews mit Hinterbliebenen und Sterbeexperten. Die Online-Interviews folgten einem flexiblen, von den Teilnehmern geleiteten Format und konzentrierten sich insbesondere auf die Motivation, Entscheidungsfindung und die eigene Wahrnehmung der Auswirkungen von Grabbeigaben. Die Transkriptanalyse folgte den Prinzipien der thematischen Analyse (Braun, Clarke, 2006).

Individuell/Relational

Viele wählten Grabbeigaben, die die Persönlichkeit, Vorlieben und Biografie des Verstorbenen widerspiegeln, etwa Kleidung und persönliche Gegenstände. Diese individuelle Identität und Handlungsfähigkeit nach dem Tod ist jedoch zutiefst relational: Die meisten Grabbeigaben werden von geliebten Menschen ausgewählt und spiegeln oft gemeinsame Erinnerungen und Beziehungen wider. Grabbeigaben symbolisieren für viele fortlaufende emotionale Bindungen und

Pflege indem sie Liebe, Erinnerung und Verbundenheit fortführen, und erinnern an das Trauermodell der „Weiterbestehenden Bindungen“, bei dem die Beziehungen zum Verstorbenen fortbestehen. In Anlehnung an die Schenkungstheorie von Mauss fördert der Austausch von Grabbeigaben die soziale Beziehung auch über den Tod hinaus. Darüber hinaus deutet die Verflechtung von Identität mit materiellen Objekten auf Vorstellungen von „verteilter“ und „dividueller“ Persönlichkeit hin, bei der Identität über Beziehungen und Objekte hinweg geteilt wird.

Vergangenheit/Gegenwart

Grabbeigaben bekräftigen die fortlaufende Beziehung zu den Toten und markieren zugleich ihre Abwesenheit. Obwohl sie die fortlaufende Anwesenheit und Bedeutung des Verstorbenen hervorriefen, betrachteten andere sie als Mittel zur abschließenden Verarbeitung oder „letzten Abschied“. Dies spiegelt einen umfassenderen Wandel der britischen Bestattungskultur von eschatologischer zu retrospektiver Identitätserfüllung wider mit dem Schwerpunkt auf Erinnerung, Biografie und persönlicher Verbindung. Grabbeigaben können starke Erinnerungen und verkörperte Reaktionen hervorrufen, die die Grenzen zwischen Vergangenheit, Gegenwart und Zukunft verzerren und die Handlungsfähigkeit des Verstorbenen durch Erinnerung und Materialität aufrechterhalten.

Aktiv/Passiv

In diesem letzten Abschnitt wird untersucht, wie Grabbeigaben die sich entwickelnde Natur der Erinnerung und der Beziehung zu den Toten reflektieren und deren dynamischen, rekonstruierten Charakter hervorheben. In derselben Weise verändern Grabbeigaben ihre Bedeutung und spiegeln sich verändernde emotionale Zustände, Identitäten und Beziehungsbindungen wider. Dies steht im Einklang mit dem Konzept der „verwandelnden Bindungen“ (transforming bonds) (Mathijssen, 2018).

Doch diese gedenkenden und materiellen Praktiken hängen von den Entscheidungen der Lebenden ab und unterstreichen, dass Grabbeigaben sowohl Spiegelungen als auch Konstrukteure von Identität sind, die in fortlaufende Prozesse der Trauer, Erinnerung und Bedeutungsbildung verwickelt sind. Sie illustrieren wie aktiv der Tote gedacht wird, ihr Vermächtnis jedoch von den Lebenden geprägt wird.

Placemaking by the Dead: Cemeteries as Emotional, Moral and Ritual Places

Simona Kuntarič Zupanc

This article examines cemeteries in north-eastern Slovenia as deathscapes where the dead act as emotional, moral and ritual agents. Drawing on ten months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in 2024, the study explores how relationships with the dead are maintained, transformed or disrupted through spatial practices and affective encounters. Everyday acts of care, such as tending graves or communicating with the deceased sustain cemeteries as places of moral continuity and family responsibility. At the same time, some encounters with the dead reveal more unsettling aspects of these relationships, where unresolved ties extend beyond death and require ritual intervention. Approaching *continuing bonds* from a spatial perspective, the article argues that relationships with the dead persist also through embodied practices tied to place.

KEYWORDS: cemetery, agency of the dead, deathscapes, continuing bonds, vernacular religion, spatial anthropology, Slovenia

Članek obravnava pokopališča v severovzhodni Sloveniji kot pokrajine smrti, v katerih umrli delujejo kot čustveni, moralni in ritualni akterji. Na podlagi desetmesečnega etnografskega terenskega dela, izvedenega leta 2024, raziskava preučuje, kako se odnosi z umrlimi ohranjajo, preoblikujejo ali prekinjajo skozi prostorske prakse in afektivna srečanja. Vsakdanja dejanja skrbi, kot so urejanje grobov in pogovori z umrlimi, ohranjajo pokopališča kot kraje moralne kontinuitete in družinske odgovornosti. Hkrati pa nekatere izkušnje stika z mrtvimi razkrivajo tudi moteče razsežnosti teh vezi, kjer se nerešeni odnosi raztezajo onkraj smrti in zahtevajo ritualno posredovanje. Na pojmovni ravni članek opredeli *model kontinuiranih vezi* skozi prostorsko perspektivo ter pokaže, da vezi z umrlimi vztrajajo tudi v utelešenih, krajevno umeščenih praksah.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: pokopališče, delovanje umrlih, pokrajine smrti, kontinuirane vezi, vernakularna religija, prostorska antropologija, Slovenija

INTRODUCTION

When I arrived in the field in north-eastern Slovenia in early January 2024 and while travelling through the hilly landscape where I was to conduct my research, I was immediately struck by the remarkable density of cemeteries in small villages. These settlements, typically consisting of 100 to 200 inhabitants spread across only 3 to 4 km², often include a fire station, a chapel, a football pitch, and one or two, sometimes even three, cemeteries.

In some larger villages or more dispersed communities, the number of cemeteries can be even higher. This pattern, much less common in western Slovenia, immediately drew my attention. In the region, marked by a long history of both Catholicism and Protestantism, people were traditionally buried in separate cemeteries according to their religious affiliation. In recent decades, however, this division has become more fluid, particularly among younger generations and within mixed-denomination families.

People visit cemeteries with varying frequency: every day, every week, after mass, on public holidays, or on the anniversary of a deceased loved one's death or birthday. Reasons for visiting also vary, including participating in burial rituals, tending graves, lighting candles, or visiting the deceased to talk with them, ask for advice, seek comfort, or resolve unresolved issues. What is certain, however, is that the place is associated with the dead and is widely perceived as a place where the dead are somehow present. As Colombo and Vlach (2021: 218) wrote, "a visit to the cemetery and remembrance of the dead is a way to confirm the link between life and death, and a tribute to a grave re-calls the connection between the living and the dead".

In popular culture, cemeteries are frequently portrayed as eerie, fearful, liminal, or even dangerous places (see Carrassi, 2023). Hallam et al. (1999) situate these interpretations within a broader critique of modernity, suggesting that contemporary Western societies, preoccupied with youth, productivity and vitality, struggle to meaningfully integrate death into public discourse and social life. Yet despite their associations with ghosts, decay or horror motifs in popular culture, cemeteries can also evoke solace, comfort and even joy. They elicit a range of emotional responses, including sadness and longing for peace, nostalgia and reflection. Death, burial and moments of final farewell can make the cemetery a place of profound sadness and even trauma. Although cemeteries are often most strongly associated with ritualised moments of loss, they are also spaces for reflection, ongoing care and remembrance. Over time, the accumulation of ritual practices, material artefacts and commemorative places helps create highly personal and emotionally resonant landscapes of mourning, places that are actively engaging and often more intimate than other, more utilitarian places of everyday life. This helps preserve cemeteries as relational places in which individuals and communities maintain affective and symbolic ties with the deceased. For many people, cemeteries are precisely the places where the boundary between the living and the dead feels closest.

In this article, drawing on ethnographic material, I explore how cemeteries function not only as places of burial and remembrance. Cemeteries are also social and affective places animated by the ongoing presence of the dead. The article examines how the agency of the dead shapes people's spatial practices, perceptions and emotional engagement with cemeteries. In particular, I analyse what triggers the agency of the dead and how this contributes to placemaking processes. In doing so, the discussion broadens understanding of the role of the dead in shaping space.

METHODOLOGY

This discussion draws on fieldwork conducted from January to November 2024 in north-eastern rural Slovenia. The fieldwork material was gathered using a classical ethnographic approach combining participant observation and semi-structured interviews to explore how people experience, interpret and deal with the agency of the dead in everyday life. During the fieldwork, I visited 24 small villages and their cemeteries, and conducted interviews with 154 interlocutors of different ages and genders. However, due to the demographic composition of the region,¹ I mainly spoke with older interlocutors, with female participants outnumbering male participants. While men described fewer personal experiences with the deceased, they emphasised ritual responsibilities towards the deceased – especially grave maintenance and participation in collective practices of remembrance.

In this region, which has a long history of both Catholicism and Protestantism (Lutheran), most of my interlocutors identified as Catholic, reflecting the broader demographic composition. Nevertheless, I deliberately included Protestant perspectives, and about one-third of my interlocutors were members of the Lutheran Church. Both Catholic and Protestant participants contributed their views, with denominational differences² most clearly manifested in ritual interventions such as blessings, prayers and cemetery maintenance or visits.

The use of narratives and cemetery-related practices in the anthropological understanding of place focuses on how local people construct, perceive and engage with their environments. Narratives and their interpretations are central to my methodology in this paper. As Keith Basso (1996: 68) notes, cultural constructions of landscape can only be understood by talking to people about the places they inhabit. This narrative-based approach is particularly suited to studying the agency of the dead, whose influence cannot be directly observed but becomes perceptible through the stories, memories and interpretative frameworks of the living. Through such narratives, the deceased emerge as active participants, comforting, unsettling or obligating the living, and in doing so, shape both practices and spatial meanings. Alongside narratives, I also attend to practices, which I documented and interpreted most effectively through (participant) observation.

This paper unfolds in four stages. First, I introduce cemeteries as deathscapes, embodied and affective environments where the dead shape these places emotionally,

¹ A demographic analysis (Malačič, 2011) of the broader area in which my fieldwork was conducted – encompassing several of the same municipalities – shows that in all eleven municipalities studied, the proportion of women is higher than that of men. This pattern results from selective migration and higher male mortality. The area is also characterised by pronounced population ageing, driven by low fertility rates and the out-migration of younger generations. The proportion of children is lower than the Slovenian average in almost all municipalities, while the share of residents aged 80 and over exceeds the national level throughout the area.

² Although prayers, floral offerings and candle-lighting for the souls of the deceased are often perceived as the primary or even exclusive forms of remembrance and engagement with the deceased, Protestant reforms legally restricted or abolished several of these practices (e.g. prayers for the souls in purgatory, evening visits to graves), particularly where they were associated with Catholic doctrines such as saint veneration or purgatorial intercession.

impose obligations, and sometimes require ritual responses. Second, I analyse the emotional and spatial embeddedness of cemeteries, showing how encounters with the dead shape the cemetery. Third, I examine cemetery practices as a means of maintaining relationships with the dead, demonstrating how everyday acts of care and mourning co-produce cemeteries as places of emotional attachment, moral continuity and obligation. Finally, I discuss various nocturnal encounters with the dead, both spontaneous and ritualised, and how these experiences further establish cemeteries as relational places. Ultimately, I consider the broader implications of these findings for understanding how the dead participate in place-making and continue to shape the moral, emotional and spatial lives of the living.

DEATHSCAPES AND CEMETERY

Cemeteries are among the most established and enduring forms of deathscapes, places where the presence of the dead is spatially materialised and socially anchored. As places of burial and remembrance, cemeteries are not merely repositories for the deceased, but active components of the social landscape. They are involved in shaping places, memory and identity, and their spatial and affective organisation reflects broader socio-cultural changes.

The concept of deathscapes refers to the spatial and material manifestations of cultural practices surrounding death as they are embedded in the landscape. As defined by Teather (2001: 185 in Hunter, 2016: 248), deathscapes are “the material expression in the landscape of practice relating to death”. Today, as society becomes more individualized, these places have become increasingly diverse.³ They can include private gardens where ashes are scattered, the sea, forests and other personalized environments. Material and spatial elements such as memorial benches, home shrines (see e.g. Wojtkowiak, Venbrux, 2010), columbaria and roadside memorials (see e.g. Collins, Opie, 2010), illustrate how such landscapes are constructed and constantly reconfigured as deathscapes and memorials. Similarly, Maddrell and Sidaway (2010: 4–5) describe deathscapes as “both the places associated with the dead and for the dead, and how these are imbued with meanings and associations”. In various studies, including that of Hallam and Hockey (2001), deathscapes emerge as important sites of place-making places characterised by social, emotional and material interactions with the dead. Deathscapes include not only burial sites but also dreams, objects, memories etc. that are not necessarily associated with the physical remains of the deceased. Dreams, in particular, function as spaces that extend deathscapes beyond material and geographically fixed locations, becoming spaces where the living and the dead can communicate (see, for example, Ivnik, 2025: 146–148, 150–151).

³ Cemeteries can therefore be understood as socially regulated spaces shaped by shared norms, religious traditions, and collective expectations, as well as sites of highly personal and individual practices. Rather than standing in opposition, my material shows that these dimensions are intertwined: personal relationships with the dead are enacted within socially structured spaces, while individual emotional engagements continuously reshape the lived meaning of the cemetery.

These places fulfil several functions: they are places where people grieve (Maddrell, Sidaway, 2010), care for and remember the dead (Maddrell, 2013), and (re)introduce the dead into the social life of the living. Beyond the marking of death itself, deathscapes are active sites of memory work (Hallam, Hockey, 2001), where the living maintain ongoing relationships with the deceased. This perspective aligns with the continuing bonds model in bereavement studies (Klass et al., 1996), which emphasises the continuity of relationships with significant dead persons rather than their separation.

The concept of deathscapes thus highlights how places associated with death are continually produced through material practices, memories and emotions. Yet to fully understand how cemeteries operate as lived places, it is necessary to look beyond their material and symbolic dimensions and consider the role of the dead themselves. Cemeteries are not only shaped by human practices of remembrance, but also by the ways in which the dead are experienced as present and active. In other words, understanding deathscapes requires us to address the *agency of the dead*, how the dead are perceived to comfort, unsettle or obligate the living, and how such agency informs spatial and ritual practices.

In order to understand how the agency of the dead is articulated in cemeteries, it is first necessary to consider how the dead have typically been represented in scholarship. Folkloristic research has primarily approached narratives about the dead as cultural and social practices through which communities articulate and reinforce their values, norms and identities. Such studies have shown that these narratives contribute to the reaffirmation of group identity and to processes of othering, particularly in relation to other ethnic or religious groups (e.g. Mencej, 2019). Narratives about the dead have been understood as part of a broader body of supernatural narratives that reflect cultural tensions, social change and perceived violations of established norms, with the dead often appearing as agents whose actions contribute to the reassertion of these norms (e.g. Valk, 2006; Raahauge, 2016). Despite these important insights, folkloristics has largely focused on narratives as carriers of collectively shared beliefs and symbolic meanings. Consequently, in comparison with bereavement studies, individual experiences and emotional responses of those affected by these narratives have largely remained in the background (cf. Primiano, 1995). In this article, I do not approach these accounts primarily as folk narratives but rather focus on how the agency of the dead is experienced, enacted and negotiated through everyday spatial and emotional practices at the cemetery by individuals.

Alongside this tradition, anthropological scholarship has often focused on corpses, understood as the material remains of the deceased, or on funerary objects such as coffins, headstones and memorials, which represent or extend the presence of the dead. Corpses have been conceptualised both as sites of identity (Foltyn, 2008) and as media of memory (Hallam, Hockey, 2001). While experiences of the dead are not necessarily tied to physical remains, they are frequently connected to cemeteries as designated burial grounds. Yet the dead are not only conceptualised through their corporeal presence.

Building on Gell's (1998) theory of agency in art and artefacts (Hockey et al., 2010: 9) I argue that the dead and the material objects associated with them, such as tombstones and possessions, extend personhood through human intentionality. Following Latour

(1993), this can be understood as the capacity to exert influence on actions and interactions (Heng, 2020: 404). While discussions of the agency of the corpse (i.e. non-living individuals) are well established, less attention has been given to the agency of spirits; entities perceived as “living” in a non-physical form (Heng, 2020: 404).

My material shows that interlocutors do not primarily locate the agency of the dead in corporeal remains or associated objects, but rather in the perceived presence and intentionality of the dead as relational beings. For instance, people described encounters in which the deceased returned as sensed presences, voices, or visions, offering guidance or demanding attention beyond the physical body or grave. In this sense, cemeteries emerge not only as material deathscapes but also as spiritual ones. Bradbury’s research (1999 in Maddrell, Sidaway, 2010: 64) similarly shows that during her fieldwork in Great Britain, there were very few occasions when anyone explicitly mentioned the bodies buried in the cemetery. This points to a paradox: while the cemetery is materially defined by the burial of bodies, everyday narratives and affective engagements with the dead rarely focus on their physical remains. Instead, the dead are evoked through memory, presence, emotion and place, making them simultaneously present and absent (Hockey, Draper, 2005: 48 in Maddrell, Sidaway, 2010: 62). Yet, as Woodthorpe (2010: 65) notes, by visiting the site of the buried body, people implicitly acknowledge its anchoring role in sustaining the social presence of the deceased.

At the same time, the buried body can be problematic. As Woodthorpe (2010: 67) explains, the body materially and ontologically anchors the cemetery as a place of death, but it is often avoided in everyday practice and narrative, producing discomfort. The buried body both demands recognition and evokes unease: it resists the abstraction typical of memorial parks, where absence is aestheticized. And yet, it is precisely the presence of the buried body that makes a cemetery a cemetery, and not just a memorial garden.

Research on contemporary cemeteries also reveals the importance of the agency of spirits. Francis et al. (2005: 123) note that “many believe that the spirit of the deceased is present at the gravesite and that contact and communication are still possible”, pointing to cemeteries as places encompassing both material and immaterial dimensions. Scholars such as Davies (2010) similarly emphasise the relational and spiritual dimensions of these places. Here, the concept of embodied space (Low, Lawrence-Zúñiga, 2003) is useful, as it highlights how human experience and consciousness take material and spatial form. Embodied space refers to the ways in which places are constituted through bodily practices, emotions and sensory engagements, showing that space is not only a physical container but is lived, felt and continually produced through human action and perception. From this perspective, cemeteries are embodied places where encounters with the dead are lived, enacted and spatially grounded.

Drawing on my ethnographic material, I argue that what is at stake is not only the body of the deceased, but also the ongoing spiritual relationship through which the dead continue to engage with the living. In this article, I conceptualise the agency of the dead in three interrelated forms: as emotional agents, eliciting comfort, fear or grief; as moral agents, imposing obligations of care and remembrance; and as ritual agents, guiding and shaping ritual practices. Taken together, these dimensions show that the dead are

not passive figures of memory. They actively shape how the cemetery is used, felt, and understood. Cemeteries are also sites where relational logics is reproduced: loving ties may continue as comforting presences, while unresolved or violent ties persist as haunting disruptions. To capture this, I distinguish between encounters of relational continuity, where bonds of love and care persist after death, and relational disruption, where conflictual or troubling ties resurface in unsettling ways. Furthermore, I differentiate between spontaneous encounters, intentional encounters and ritualized encounters, each of which reflects different modalities of relating to the dead.

RELATIONAL ENCOUNTERS WITH THE DEAD AT THE CEMETERY

The following chapter explores how people perceive and interpret the presence of the dead in cemeteries, focusing on the emotional and spatial significance of these sites. Encounters with the dead are often framed in terms of fear or the uncanny, especially in narratives of hauntings associated with specific places, such as haunted buildings (cf. Mencej, 2015). As Valk (2006: 33) notes, unusual experiences linked to the presence of ghosts – understood as both known dead, such as family members or friends, and unknown dead, often depicted as strangers or “demonised others” – are most likely to occur when people find themselves “in the wrong place at the wrong time” or when they move from familiar, everyday environments into unfamiliar, strange, or potentially dangerous spaces. Similar interpretations are found in accounts of cemeteries (e.g. Lindow, 2018) and church buildings (e.g. Koski, 2018), which are often conceptualised as liminal spaces.

This section focuses on an often-overlooked dimension: the positive, comforting and even desired aspects of these experiences. It highlights how the presence of the dead is felt, and how such affective encounters contribute to the cemetery’s emotional meaning. Particular attention is given to how these encounters, whether spontaneous or intentionally initiated, shape people’s relationships with the dead and influence their spatial and emotional practices within the cemetery.

In their influential work, Klass, Silverman and Nickman (1996) challenged the Freudian paradigm, which understood mourning as a process of detaching emotional energy from the deceased with the ultimate goal of severing bonds, and introduced the model of *continuing bonds*. This model emphasises that maintaining a relationship with the deceased can be a natural and adaptive way of coping with grief. However, as Klass and colleagues point out, not all bonds are necessarily positive, a point that is often subject to misinterpretation (1996: 72; see also Klass, 2006: 844). My material confirms this observation: the nature of relationships during life may shape their continuation after death. Loving ties persist as comforting presences and sources of moral support (continuities), while conflictual or violent relationships endure as burdensome hauntings that require ritual resolution (disruptions) (see chapter *Nocturnal encounters with the dead*). Although this ethnographic focus is on how such relational logics manifest in cemeteries, these connections are not confined to cemeteries. They also unfold through everyday practices beyond the cemetery, occurring both in other deathscapes such as memorial sites, home shrines,

or places of accidents (see Maddrell, 2013); and in ordinary domestic settings, where the dead are integrated into daily routines (see Walter, 1996; Hallam, Hockey, 2001). I differentiate between everyday practices, such as visiting graves, lighting candles, or speaking to the dead, and ritualized forms of engagement, including blessings, prayers, or vernacular rituals, through which relationships with the dead are collectively structured or formally negotiated.

At this point, it is useful to clarify what is meant by an encounter with the dead. When people talk about the dead, they often describe experiences that feel like direct encounters with the deceased. The phenomenology of such contact is broad and diverse. As Kwilecki (2009: 101) notes, the dead may manifest in many ways: through sensory perceptions (visual apparitions, hearing the voice of the deceased, specific scents, or even tactile impressions), intuitive feelings of presence, or symbolic messages and meaningful synchronicities. Klass and Steffen (2018: 4) further distinguish several modalities of continuing bonds with the dead: the perception of presence, sensory encounters, the conscious incorporation of the deceased's traits into one's own self, and the belief that the dead actively influence thoughts or events (see also Parker, 2005). Other studies describe dream visitations, telepathic messages, or extraordinary experiences that occur in liminal moments (Bennett, 1999). These manifestations are never limitless but shaped by what Raahauge calls a "limited emanation of presence" (2016: 97). They are conditioned by time, space and sensory channels, such that one may, for example, "hear" but not "see" the dead. At the same time, these encounters are not understood as religious phenomena but as deeply relational. Day (2012: 170) proposes the term extraordinary relationality to capture this dimension: the experiences are extraordinary in form, yet ordinary in meaning, since they typically involve loved ones rather than anonymous spirits. Across contexts, what defines these encounters is their relational nature: the dead are not experienced as distant abstractions but as familiar presences who continue to participate in the everyday life of the living. Since the phenomenology of encounters with the dead is broad, I use the term *encounter with the dead* as a broad category that encompasses both feelings of presence and more structured experiences.

Encounter with the Dead

One Sunday morning, I drove an elderly woman from the village to her parish church to attend mass. On the way from her home to the church, we passed through three villages and past no fewer than four cemeteries, including the one where her late husband, children and parents are buried. As we drove past, she made the sign of the cross. When I asked her why she did so, she replied with a laugh, "*To greet them*" (Interlocutor SK009, female, 1930).

Experiences of felt presence demonstrate one modality of the agency of the dead. The feeling of presence is often spontaneous and is not triggered by mediums, rituals or special tools. As Parker (2005: 258) notes, these experiences typically occur "at or after the death of a person known to the bereaved and are interpreted by the bereaved as contact or communication with the deceased". Although Parker focuses on bereaved individuals, this does not mean that those who are not grieving do not have such experiences.

The following example shows how emotionally significant relationships with the deceased affect both individual grief and the experience of the cemetery.

By now I've grown used to cemeteries, and attending funerals no longer feels difficult. I always carry in the back of my mind: "Yes, a person has died, but they still live on". There's this feeling of presence because for me it isn't the end. It would be strange if it were the end. Think of quantum physics and all of that, it's all energy. And you can't destroy energy. How could you? Energy, if it's intelligent enough to hold itself together, must continue on. To destroy it? I don't believe that's possible. Energy always transforms. That's how I see it. Our mind, our consciousness probably evolves too. That's how I imagine it. (Interlocutor SK113, female, 1982, 28.6.2024)

The interlocutor explained that cemeteries had always made her feel uneasy and that she had not encountered death personally for much of her life. Until the death of her stepfather at the age of twenty-seven, she had not experienced a close loss; some neighbours or acquaintances had passed away, but she had not felt a strong connection to them. She attended funerals only rarely and associated visits to the cemetery mainly with All Saints' Day, which she described as a time of gathering and warmth. As she recalled, children would spend hours at the cemetery, lighting white candles, playing among the graves, and admiring the glow that illuminated the entire space. Later, however, her perception changed; the death of her stepfather marked her first profound experience of loss, after which funerals and cemeteries became emotionally difficult and heavy. Only later, when she and her partner, both musicians, began singing at funerals, did she gradually become accustomed to these places and start to perceive them differently: as places where the energy of the dead accumulates and where their presence can be felt.

Studies in bereavement and death studies (e.g. Davies, Shaw, 1995; Klass et al., 1996; Bennett, 1999) indicate that experiences of contact, communication, or felt presence typically occur with close kin or significant others, underlining the relational and affective basis of such encounters. Among various groups for whom death is understood not as a biological end but as a transitional phase in which the dead continue to exist as individuals, spirits are often perceived as carriers of agency. In Maddrell's (2013) work on "memoriescapes", it is noted that the living often perceive the spirits of the deceased as living and capable of action, that is, as entities with whom contact can still be made to receive help or comfort, even if this communication is often only one-way. This line of argument is further developed in Maddrell and Mathijssen (2022), where cemeteries are conceptualised through a spatial lens as lived, relational and processual. They are shown to embody mortal remains, act as focal points for commemoration, and symbolise continuing relationships with the deceased. Cemeteries thus not only reflect religious and cultural geographies, through iconography, spatial organisation, and ritual practices, but also provide places where the living can maintain bonds with the dead, negotiate identities, and materialise beliefs about the afterlife.

In interviews conducted during fieldwork, several widowed interlocutors who have lived alone since the death of their husbands described visiting the grave as a comforting experience and spoke of the cemetery as a place where they feel emotionally uplifted after each visit.

/.../ even better, if you're in trouble, you can talk to them there. (unintelligible – note) ... and I can chat with him [late husband] (laughs – note). You stay for a bit, then you go home, and you feel a little better. (Interlocutor SK001, female, 1944, 31.1.2024)

I go to the cemetery and at least say hello to someone (laughs), and it makes me feel a bit better because I sort of have a little conversation there. (Interlocutor SK055, female, 1952, 26.3.2024)

The cemetery thus becomes a place where widows visit their late husbands, express worries, wishes, or simply ease their loneliness through a sense of continued presence. Both women explained that after their husbands' deaths, they were left living alone, with few (living) people to talk to. More broadly, my field observations suggest that, due to the migration of younger generations to urban areas, many elderly people remain alone in their homes, sometimes as the only residents on their street or, in some cases, among the last inhabitants of the village. The cemetery thus offers a communicative and emotional place where solitude is temporarily suspended through the presence of the dead.

This perspective aligns with studies on continuing bonds (Klass et al., 1996), yet extends them beyond the realm of private memory: bonds with the dead are not only internalised recollections but are also spatialised and enacted in the cemetery as a shared cultural space. In this sense, cemeteries operate as *embodied deathscapes* (Woodthorpe, 2010), where ongoing relationships with the deceased are sustained through material gestures, affective presence and communicative practices. As Kwilecki (2009: 101–102) notes, the central function of such communication is not merely evidentiary but therapeutic, offering comfort and continuity to the bereaved through spontaneous encounters that occur independently of ritual specialists or mediators. Although most interlocutors found it difficult to say whether they received a response, one elderly woman told me: *“In my head, I felt he [late husband] said, ‘You’ll be okay’”* (Interlocutor SK001, female, 1944, 31.1.2024).

The way in which people talk to the dead can vary; from speaking aloud to inner conversations, as my next interlocutor told me:

No, I talk to them ... in my mind. “Mum, thank you for giving me life, for bringing me into this world.” I go to the cemetery on her birthday and I tell her that. Yes, physically. And also psychologically, I feel it inside, yes. So I talk to them; I mean, I talk to my mother and father, as well as my godparents and grandparents. The dead hear us. They see us. With their soul. (Interlocutor SK049, male, 1962, 13.3.2024)

However, even if communication takes the form of an inner monologue, this does not diminish the feeling that the deceased are being addressed by these words, and that they really hear them. The deceased are understood as being present in soul, meaning they are not simply absent but occupy another form of presence that allows for ongoing communication and the continued observation of the living. The interlocutor perceives the deceased as sentient and responsive entities who exist in a spiritual form yet remain engaged in this world. Memory becomes an act that occurs at a specific location and time (e.g., a birthday), with a clear emotional structure (e.g., an expression of gratitude). Such practices reinforce the significance of the cemetery as a place in which spiritual ties are materialised.

Seeking Support and Guidance

In contemporary accounts of encounters with the dead, we often find what Bennett (1999) calls the dead as “witnesses”, deceased people who remain actively present in the lives of the living. These are frequently close relatives – parents, children or spouses – whose presence is experienced as supportive rather than frightening. While folk narratives may also recount the return of close relatives, such figures are often embedded in established narrative patterns and moral frameworks, frequently appearing as bearers of warnings or advice. By contrast, in contemporary personal accounts, encounters with the dead are framed primarily as relational and situational experiences, oriented toward help, guidance or emotional support. My ethnographic fieldwork shows that such interactions are not marginal or exceptional but constitute a common and expected dimension of everyday life, as the living frequently turn to the dead – particularly to the known dead⁴ – for guidance and support.

As a family, even though many years have passed, we still visit the cemeteries frequently. My parents divorced, and I became the one who takes care of the grave. My mother helps me a lot, too. My father always goes, he strictly visits the cemetery every Saturday. /.../ Because everyone in the family knows about the bond between me and my [late] grandmother, or rather, my grandparents, it was just that kind of ... I have the feeling that they are somewhere, but I can't find them. I don't know, sometimes I even feel like I need some guidance, their opinions, I feel their presence. But what's interesting is that I'm not afraid. I actually want it. Even when I go to the cemetery, I talk, and I'm never scared. Even if I walk around the whole cemetery and look around a bit, I feel no fear. Why should I? (Interlocutor SK094, female, 1988, 17.5.2024)

It is interesting to note here that the interlocutor repeatedly emphasises that she is not afraid of contact with the dead or visiting the cemetery. This, in a way, reflects the general

⁴ The known dead are deceased individuals with whom a person had a direct, personal relationship during their lifetime, such as relatives, partners, close friends, or other emotionally significant figures.

societal expectations regarding such encounters, expectations she herself does not share. The cemetery thus emerges as a place where the presence of the dead is normalised and integrated into everyday affective life, reaffirming the idea that place-making involves the continued agency of the dead.

In times of difficult life decisions or wishes, the living often turn to the dead at the cemetery to seek advice and support. Through their perceived presence, the dead provide comfort and assist the living in making important decisions or fulfilling their wishes. For example, one interlocutor described how she asked her deceased relatives for help after an argument with her husband when she wished he would call her:

On that 31st of October, when my husband called me, well, that's a holiday for us. I was at home and he was probably at work. I always go to the cemetery on the 31st to take candles, so that the next day I can go up there empty-handed, with just one candle. As I was driving, I kept thinking: Please, universe, help me, let my husband get in touch. Then I arrived at the cemetery. First, I went to the grave of my husband's grandmother, my mother-in-law's mother, and I asked the same thing. Auntie, mum, please help, let Lojzek reach out. That's how I was pleading. Then I drove towards the town [the name of the place has been anonymized] and stopped at the cemetery in the village [the name of the place has been anonymized] and asked again: Mum, dad, tell Lojzek⁵ to call. As I was driving towards the town, just as I reached the village, I saw it on the car screen: Alojz⁶ is calling. What do you say to that? That it was just a coincidence? There's no such thing as coincidence, never. That was the moment. That was the first time he called me, so I could finally hear him. Before, I couldn't hear him. That was the first time. (Interlocutor SK010, female, 1973, 5.2.2024)

The interlocutor went on to explain that she shared this experience with her Lutheran priest, who does not support such practices. However, as the interlocutor noted, she simply stopped discussing these experiences with her priest because the priest had a different opinion. This situation can be understood through the lens of vernacular religion (Primiano, 1995), defined as religion as it is lived and practised in everyday contexts. Lived religion is not a fixed system, but a constantly changing amalgam of official and unofficial ideas and practices, shaped through interaction with others, including both peers and religious authorities. In this case, communication with the dead forms part of the interlocutor's lived religious practice, shaped by personal experience and negotiated in relation to religious authority.

The living turn to the dead not only for comfort but for assistance in real-life challenges. The case also reinforces the emotional logic behind such engagements: the dead

⁵ The name and nickname have been pseudonymized.

⁶ Lojzek is a diminutive form of Alojz. The interlocutor uses both the official name and the nickname in her narrative.

are not imagined as distant ancestors, but as responsive presences who remain embedded in the everyday concerns of the living. Asking the dead for advice in the cemetery and immediately receiving the desired response underscores the intimate affective and spatial dynamics through which the living negotiate relationships with the dead.

Another request for help at the cemetery came from a mother whose son moved away from home, and she asked her late parents to help her son return home:

Interlocutor SK145: *My younger son moved away to live with his girlfriend and wasn't coming back home. I cried a lot and went to the cemetery. I broke down and cried: "Dad and Mum, please help me. My child ... my son has left." The next morning at eight, this is what happened, well, not exactly eight, my husband had already gone to work, precisely at half past five, and my [late] father came. I heard him and I saw him. How can I explain this to you in Slovenian, how it works ... like a ghost. He knocked, and I saw his face, so I got up. He knocked on the bedroom door and called out, not Dragica, but Draga. He used to call me Draga, and I saw his face, so I got up and shouted: "What is it, Dad?" And then I didn't see him anymore. I saw him as clearly as I see you now. But that was a ghost. Do you understand? I saw his face so clearly. And I responded, I shouldn't have, they say, but it startled me. I said: "What is it, Dad?" And I cried so much afterwards. I still see his face in my dreams.*

SK: *What happened to your son? You had asked your late father to help you, right?*

Interlocutor SK145: *What happened is that everything was resolved. The boy didn't dare come home, but after I cried and broke down, it was sorted out in a good way right away. (Interlocutor SK145, female, 1952, 18.11.2024)*

The narrator's emotional breakdown at the cemetery, addressed to her deceased parents, initiates a sequence that culminates in what she experiences as a direct response from her late father. The appearance of her father – his voice, his face, and even his characteristic way of addressing her – serves as a moment of intense affective and sensory confirmation of his continued presence. What is significant here is the relational logic of the encounter. The living seeks emotional and practical support from the deceased during a time of distress, and the deceased responds in a way that restores agency and resolves the problem. The perceived ghostly appearance is seen as comforting, familiar and meaningful, although she cried a lot afterwards.

The cemetery thus functions as an efficacious place for activating these bonds, as a site of consultation and care where the living turn to the dead for support.

Ritual Communication with the Dead

Spatially, cemeteries – along with other death-related or emotionally significant locations, such as places where someone died or is buried, as well as sites associated with memory, labour, or affection – can activate or reveal the agency of the dead. Two foundational

aspects of studying spatial perception and the social dimensions of landscape are temporality (Ingold, 1993) and transformability (Bender, 1993). Temporally, encounters are often associated with liminal moments – transitional periods within daily, annual, or life cycle rhythms – such as nighttime, All Saints' Day (1 November), the anniversary of death, or funerals. Cemeteries are also places where the living bid farewell to the dead in a ritual sense. Funerals are particularly interesting moments for observation in this regard. On such occasions, the sense of the presence of the dead is often intensified. One of my interlocutors described her experience at her mother's funeral as follows:

During the funeral, when a certain song was playing, I had this strange experience. Our social worker later asked me: "What were you looking at up there? What caught your attention?" And honestly, I don't even know. I just remember feeling something at that moment, as if something was happening above me. The clouds had formed into the shape of angel wings, and I kept looking up, trying to understand what it meant. Afterwards, people at the funeral said: "What were you doing? You seemed to sense something, you were pointing at something." I can't explain it. But I truly felt some kind of energy because my mother and I were very close. I couldn't grasp what had happened to her, so I went to speak to this woman [the social worker]. While we were talking, she told me: "Pay attention to these signs." (Interlocutor SK052, female, 1978, 25.3.2025)

Although the interlocutor does not say it explicitly, it is clear that she felt the presence of her deceased mother. The social worker also confirmed to her that these were signs from her mother. The interlocutor explained that what made the experience so unusual was precisely the sense of her mother's comforting presence during the funeral, something she deeply needed at that moment. Her perception of a particular *energy*, the symbolic interpretation of the clouds as angel wings, and the feeling of being in an intensified emotional and sensory state all point to such an experience. In the interlocutor's case, the strong emotional bond with her mother continues after death and, in the liminal moment of the funeral, is realised as a comforting presence.

Other interlocutors described similar signs on the day of the funeral; for example, the morning light had a special, positive and calming quality, which they interpreted as a sign of the deceased's presence. These experiences are often understood as spiritual or affective interactions with the deceased that provide comfort to the bereaved, reaffirm their relational bonds or give them meaning. In some cases, the presence of the dead at the cemetery during a funeral is interpreted as a warning, particularly when the deceased's last wishes are perceived as having been ignored. One interlocutor explained that a deceased neighbour "made herself known" through a thunderstorm and heavy rain during the funeral, which she linked to the fact that the neighbour's wish to be buried in a coffin rather than cremated had not been respected by her children.

These examples point to how funerary moments intensify people's engagement with the dead at the cemetery. The dead thus emerge as participants in ritual communication; agents who comfort, admonish, or reassert their presence.

SPATIAL PRACTICES AS RELATIONSHIP MAINTENANCE: CARE AND OBLIGATION

Care

Cemetery activities performed on a regular basis, such as cleaning, planting flowers, watering them and lighting candles are described not only as duties, but as ways of maintaining a connection with the dead and serve to affirm the living's own position within local moral geographies. This section further unpacks how the agency of the dead manifests through embodied care and place-based practice.

People I spoke with often explained that they tended graves for the sake of their deceased loved ones. Caring for the grave, they said, was a way of expressing gratitude and affection, showing that they had cared for them in life and did not forgotten them in death. Grave maintenance, then, is also a moral and emotional practice that reaffirms relational ties, distributes familial responsibility, and allows the living to participate in a meaningful dialogue with the dead. As one interlocutor put it:

The two of us feel quite connected to our deceased. The graves, I'm from [anonymized village name] that's where they're all buried. My grandmother and grandfather, as well as my mother and father, they still have their graves and headstones, and we still take care of them. Whereas for my great-grandfather and great-grandmother, we've let that go. But we still maintain things, cleaning, planting flowers, and lighting candles. Not just on 1 November; we come and take care of things there all year round. We water the flowers, for example. Basically, we take care of it. (Interlocutor SK035, male, 1949, 4.3.2024)

Acts such as weeding the grave, bringing seasonal flowers, or replacing a candle are performed not just out of social obligation or tradition, but with the sense that the deceased “see”, “know”, or even “feel” this care. In many cases, people describe these acts in relational terms; for example, “*she [the late mother] would have liked this flower*”. Through such ongoing care, the dead remain part of the family or community, and the cemetery becomes a place of continued connection.

One female interlocutor told me how, just before my arrival, she had gone for a walk in the woods and gathered a small bouquet of snowdrops. Later that day, she carried them to her mother's grave, explaining that snowdrops had always been her mother's favourite flowers. Another interlocutor recalled how the blooming of daffodils in early spring unfailingly reminded him of his late mother. Each year, he would gather a bunch

and carry them to her grave, repeating a gesture he had often performed while she was still alive: *“I liked picking flowers and bringing them to her [when she was still alive]. And every time I go to the cemetery, I remember her and bring a bouquet of daffodils”* (Interlocutor SK030, male, 1943, 28.2.2024).

Grave care appears as a daily or weekly activity, not limited to ritual occasions. It is not framed merely as respect or care, but also as an obligation, sometimes explicitly described as a “duty to the dead”. People explain these acts as fulfilling a promise, expressing love, or ensuring that the deceased are not forgotten or abandoned.

Yes, now the two of us take care of our two graves, then two graves of some neighbours, and the grave of a woman who is buried here. My daughter was still young when she carried the cross for her. We take care of these people because she asked me, she had no children. I had just given birth to my children one after another, with only 15 months between them. My husband was working, we had no grandparents to help, and we were cultivating the field. That woman felt sorry for me and often came to help. “I’ll work in the field for you, and you just take care of the babies”, she’d say. And we gave her a respectful burial here, and took care of everything. And back then, she asked me: “If I don’t have anyone, could you at least plant a flower on my grave?” And we’ve kept our promise ever since, for as long as we are able. When we are no longer able, we’ll put gravel instead of soil on the grave. She has a beautiful gravestone, which she had made beforehand, and that’s how it is. But we take care of it. (Interlocutor SK097, female, 1956, 18.5.2024)

This case shows that grave care is not limited to kin. It can also arise from reciprocity, moral obligation, and promises made during life. The interlocutor and her husband not only tend their family graves but also those of neighbours and a deceased woman who once helped her during a difficult period in her life. Her promise to “at least plant a flower” on that woman’s grave has become a long-term affective commitment, reflecting a moral and emotional bond rooted in mutual aid and gratitude. Read through the lens of reciprocity, as discussed by Mencej (2025: 346) in relation to medieval and early modern European communities, such relationships reveal a continuity of exchange between the living and the dead. In those contexts, moral relations were structured around balancing what Mencej describes as the “gifts of the dead to the living, such as life, property, and personal identity”, which were considered so substantial that they posed a threat to the recipients unless they were offset by counter-gifts of equivalent value (2025: 346). In my case, grave tending becomes both an affective gesture of gratitude and a moral return. As Mencej observes, the dead become persons and partners in reciprocal relations with living human beings (2025: 366–367).

The interlocutors generally emphasised that caring for graves is primarily a form of care, a continuation of a relationship, often also regarded as a moral duty. One woman, whom I also interviewed, had lived with an abusive husband and continued to visit his

grave after his death. When I asked her why she tended his grave despite the fact that he had behaved violently, she admitted that she felt relief after his passing, as she was no longer subjected to physical abuse. Still, she believed it was right, as a wife, to maintain his grave because it was expected of her. Other female interlocutors, however, expressed the opposite view: for them, their husband's death marked the definitive end of a violent relationship, and they therefore ceased caring for his grave. This can be understood as a form of liberation, not only from the violence itself but also from the social norms traditionally imposed on women, which I will discuss further in a following subchapter.

Obligation

Although most of my interlocutors spoke of grave care as a continuation of a relationship with the deceased, my observation of village life revealed that communal expectations regarding the appearance of graves also play a significant role in these practices. One morning, I joined an elderly woman as she tended the graves in her care – those of her husband, her deceased children, and her parents. Maintaining three graves was a considerable burden for her, and during the work she often complained that her daughter-in-law offered no help. That same day, a funeral was taking place in the cemetery, and upon returning home, the daughter-in-law remarked that she had cleaned the graves precisely so that the mourners would not think her graves were “neglected”. In this context, graves function almost as extensions of household gardens – spaces that must be kept tidy not only for the sake of personal remembrance but also to meet the expectations of neighbours and the wider community. However, this expectation that graves must always be tidy is relatively recent:

There are holidays, anniversaries, Sundays. Look, when I was growing up /.../ people didn't go to light candles regularly. They would light them on All Saints' Day. Later, they began lighting them for birthdays, holidays, Christmas ... But nowadays, if you drive past a cemetery in the evening, everything is lit up. If people hear there's going to be a funeral tomorrow, they'll light a bunch of candles today because they go to light candles for their own deceased too. (Interlocutor SK016, male, 1962, 10.2.2024)

A similar sense of obligation is imposed by local authorities, for example through the payment of grave rent. If this is not paid, abandoned graves are removed after a certain period. A representative of the local authorities explained:

We consider the cemetery and the mourning house to be very important and highly visible spaces. If they are not well maintained, it creates a negative impression for outsiders. By the way, I attended a funeral last week [in Hungary], near the border, my friend passed away. I must say that the cemetery in [anonymized name of the town] is very poorly maintained. (Interlocutor SK038, male, 1961, 6.3.2024)

A well-maintained cemetery can also reflect how well a community functions, indicating the role of the municipality as a political and administrative structure responsible for the care and maintenance of communal space. Local funeral services also play a significant role, often taking inspiration from practices across the border in Austria:⁷

That used to bother me, cemeteries left untended, overgrown with grass. They used to clean them only once a year, if at all, and that was at the end of October, on Reformation Day, a public holiday when people didn't work at home but went to clean the cemeteries before All Saints' Day. It was a tradition: on 31 October, the cemeteries were cleaned. /.../ Today, they are much better maintained. (Interlocutor SK016, male, 1962, 10.2.2024)

Public and religious holidays, such as All Saints' Day (1 November), also play an important role in shaping the rhythm of cemetery care. On this day, people across the region clean and decorate graves, while local leaders often organise communal work initiatives during which villagers volunteer to mow the grass and maintain shared areas of the cemetery. Thus, grave care can be seen both as a collective activity shaped by the influence of local authorities, the church and village communities, and as an individual practice motivated by personal feelings of care, the continuation of a relationship, or a moral sense of duty.

At the same time, the intensity of (grieving) emotions can also disrupt these practices. The interlocutor's inability to visit the grave after her mother's sudden death reflects how intense emotions can reshape spatial practices.

At the beginning, when it happened, it was very, very hard for me to go, because even afterwards it still hurt a lot. I remember standing by the grave, and by the time I drove home, I was completely in tears, so sad. At the beginning, I didn't want to go at all. Deep down I knew she was gone, but it was hard to accept that she was truly no longer there. Well, now I do go, for example on All Saints' Day or on the anniversary of her death, but at that time, my daughter and my son, and others like my husband went instead. I think my husband even goes every day to light a candle. (Interlocutor SK050, female, 1975, 13.3.2024)

⁷ In the Slovenian context, comparisons with neighbouring countries are frequent and culturally significant. Austria often serves as a positive reference point for standards of development, progress and infrastructure, particularly in border regions with long-standing historical, economic and everyday cross-border ties. Such comparisons do not necessarily imply idealisation, but rather provide a locally shared framework for assessing change and improvement. By contrast, in the region where my fieldwork was conducted, Hungary serves as an alternative reference point. The region was occupied and annexed by Hungary during the Second World War, and prior to the First World War it formed part of the Hungarian half of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. These historical experiences continue to shape local memories and comparative imaginaries, in which Hungary is often invoked as a negative reference associated with political domination, isolation and perceived economic stagnation, especially in contrast to Austria.

The difficult period following the death of her mother prevented the interlocutor from visiting the cemetery for some time. The presence of the dead mother is experienced so intensely that entering the cemetery triggers crying, sadness and emotional distress for my interlocutor. In this case, the cemetery can be understood as a site of transformation, where through practices of care – as well as their temporary suspension – a new relationship with the deceased mother is gradually formed. While the interlocutor does not explicitly frame this process as a transformation, the shifting pattern of presence, absence, and selective visitation suggests a gradual reconfiguration of her relationship with the deceased and the cemetery. This is not simply mourning as an internal psychological process, but a spatial-relational dynamic in which emotions, bodily reactions, and practices of visitation intertwine, making the cemetery a place where the presence of the dead is felt. This example also shows that the relationship with the deceased is not static; the agency of the dead is evident in the very fact that the person is “not yet ready” for contact. The cemetery thus emerges as a place of internal preparation, transformation, and the gradual re-establishment of relational bonds. An important dimension here is also the collective distribution of care: the husband, children, and the interlocutor each maintain a relationship with the deceased mother in different ways and at different rhythms. The practice of caring for the dead reveals family dynamics in which responsibility, emotional readiness, and modes of connection to the deceased differ. This is a collective, but not uniform experience.

The emotional experience of the presence of the deceased person in the grave produces the experience of the absence of the living person. The cemetery is not a place where the deceased simply “rest in peace”, but a place where they are felt in various ways, including as a painful absence that has not yet been fully integrated. This tension resonates with the concept of *absence-presence* (see Maddrell, 2013), which highlights how the connection with the deceased is enacted not only through inner memory but also as through material and spatial practices driven by emotions and ritual habits (Maddrell, 2013). The cemetery is thus not only the resting place of the body but a place where the bereaved gradually activates a new form of presence, a relationship that cannot yet be fully acknowledged or integrated, but which is nonetheless felt and maintained.

NOCTURNAL ENCOUNTERS WITH THE DEAD

In the village where I stayed during my fieldwork, I often went for evening walks. Whenever I met someone near the cemetery, which lay along my route, they would ask whether I was not afraid to pass by it at night. For a time, I also parked my car in the lot beside the cemetery, not wanting to crowd my hosts’ yard. After a few days, however, my host asked why I had left it there and advised me not to keep it overnight near the cemetery, adding that the national border was close by and that all sorts of things can happen during the night. Such remarks suggest a shared unease: cemeteries are places people prefer to avoid after dark. Few explained precisely why, but the implication was always that it was “better not to go there”. A woman, whom I also interviewed, had moved

to a neighbouring village ten years earlier and expressed something similar. Her new home stands next to the cemetery, a location she admits she has never grown used to. Even now, she told me, it leaves her with a strange, unsettling feeling, especially at night.

Spontaneous Encounter

Spontaneous encounters with the dead are unplanned moments in which the presence of the deceased is felt rather than consciously sought. Unlike intentional encounters, such as those described in the section *Seeking Support and Guidance*, these experiences occur unexpectedly, often without ritual mediation or deliberate intent. One example of such a spontaneous *negative* encounter with an unknown dead⁸ in the cemetery at night is described in the account of my interlocutor's mother:

SK: *How do you feel about spaces such as cemeteries?*

Interlocutor SK113: *I don't like cemeteries.*

SK: *You don't?*

Interlocutor SK113: *No, I don't feel good there. It's like there's some kind of negative energy. (laughs)*

SK: *Has anything ever happened to you there, or is it just a feeling?*

Interlocutor SK113: *It's more of a feeling, like the air is heavy, saturated with some kind of weight. But something did happen to my mother. After my stepfather died, she went to the cemetery every day. It made her feel better somehow. Once, she went there quite late, I think it was around New Year's Eve, close to midnight, and as she was leaving, she felt as if someone was walking behind her. (laughs) She ran home quickly!*

SK: *But not your [late] father?*

Interlocutor SK113: *Apparently someone else. Because if it had been my [late] father, it would have felt good. She said, "I'll never go to the cemetery at midnight again!" (laughs) When my father died, she didn't want to go to any more funerals. And neither did I. You distance yourself from cemeteries and funerals because it's already heavy enough, you're always reminded of your own [loss]. But life eventually leads you back, you have to go. (Interlocutor SK113, female, 1982, 28.6.2024)*

Often, in negative spontaneous encounters, the deceased were unknown; that is, individuals whom my interlocutors were unable to identify. The interlocutor also emphasised that the experience would have been positive had it involved contact with her deceased father, that is, with a known dead person.

The following case describes a nocturnal encounter in the cemetery with deceased neighbours who were considered to have been witches during their lifetimes.

⁸ Unknown dead refers to deceased individuals who are not personally known to the living and with whom no prior relationship exists.

Interlocutor SK145: *I really do not know how to explain it well ... you can't hear it right now, but black magic does something, it takes away your strength, you lose your health, you don't feel well in the house, you can't sleep ... something is done to you. But you have to cleanse it.*

SK: *And are these witches buried here in the cemetery?*

Interlocutor SK145: *They are, they are.*

SK: *And do you know where they are?*

Interlocutor SK145: *Of course, they were our neighbours.*

SK: *And does anything happen around there?*

Interlocutor SK145: *No, no ... but people always say that at midnight in the cemetery, you get this strange feeling. Now I'm scared, I don't go there anymore.*

SK: *You don't? Did you go once?*

Interlocutor SK145: *I did, once, at eleven o'clock [in the evening]. I went up there, and you know what, it was so quiet, and something was happening. Just as I'm telling you, there was this kind of mist all around me, and a wind started blowing around me, and I looked around, and things were happening ... strange sounds, very quiet, whispering. The wind was carrying that mist. Uff, I shivered and ran away, I'm not going to the cemetery again [in the evening].* (Interlocutor SK145, female, 1952, 18.11.2024)

Here, when speaking about the deceased neighbours whom villagers regarded as witches, the interlocutor understood this social category as inherently negative, along with the negative traits and abilities these women were believed to possess. She explicitly linked her negative experience to the fact that they were considered witches. It is also important to note that she was not referring to a particular individual, but rather to a broader social category of deceased women labelled as witches.⁹ The agency of the unknown dead thus manifests through unsettling experiences, particularly at night in the cemetery. Such encounters evoke feelings of fear or unease and reinforce the perception that cemeteries are places to be avoided after dark.

From Spontaneous to Ritualised Encounter

The following examples illustrate not so much a spontaneous encounter with the dead as a deliberate practice carried out in the cemetery, a place where the presence of the dead is expected and where contact can be intentionally initiated. The nocturnal encounter with the dead in the cemetery reveals two key elements that are interwoven in the narrative: fear of the cemetery as a place associated with the supernatural, and the procedures for confronting the influence of the dead on the living – when visiting the cemetery and confronting the dead are indeed desirable – as they may allow the living to free themselves from the

⁹ In many communities, including rural Slovenia (see Mencej, 2017), “witches” are a socially recognised category – people discussed and marked by specific moral, social, and often gendered meanings. These individuals do not necessarily identify as witches; rather, the community categorises them as such based on gossip, suspicion, or particular behaviours.

presence of the haunting dead. One of my interlocutors emphasised how she faced up to this fear and, in doing so, broke the bond with her deceased husband. This act was not framed as an uninvited haunting, but as a necessary step toward reclaiming agency and closing a traumatic chapter. The cemetery thus functioned as a ritual landscape – emotionally charged, socially significant, and spiritually active – where communication with the dead was not only possible but expected as part of the healing process.

Interlocutor SK145: *One of my friends had a husband who used to walk with her a lot, but then he started threatening her badly, beating her, and saying she wouldn't get his pension because he would come to haunt her at home [after his death]. And he did, every evening, he would stand by her bed. She saw him; she saw his whole figure, standing right by her bed. She asked for help in spiritual ways. At that time, there was Ernest [a Protestant priest], after her husband passed away, he said ...*

/.../

SK: *And did he help with this?*

Interlocutor SK145: *Yes, he told her she had to go to [his] grave in the evening and scold him. She should throw everything at him, tell him: "You are there, I am here. Leave my life alone, and I'll give you peace." She did that, after she lit a candle. She said she didn't even know how she made it back from the cemetery, she was limping so badly.*

SK: *And the priest advised her to do that?*

Interlocutor SK145: *Yes, he advised her. They know how to deal with this. Everything can be cleansed. If you're caught in black magic, you have no luck, you suffer, you're ill, something is happening, and you go to these bioenergetics people, they tell you that you have black magic on you. It can be cleared, but it costs money. You've never heard of that before, have you? Well, now you'll remember. /.../*

SK: *Do you think this also has an effect, for example, when people are in conflict and don't do what the other person wanted?*

Interlocutor SK145: *It does, it does, it does. You remember how I told you about the neighbour and her mother, her mother threatened her: "When I die, I won't leave you in peace." And that husband threatened his wife too. She opened her eyes and saw him. She opened her eyes again and didn't see him, and when she opened them once more, he was gone. And then she asked the priest, she looked into everything and sorted it out. Those priests, they know a lot. They are trained for this; they have to know all of it. And if you turn to them when you have these problems, they know how to advise you. (Interlocutor SK145, female, 1952, 18.11.2024)*

The case of the haunting husband illustrates what might be considered an unpleasant form of continuing bonds (see Klass et al., 1996: 72; Klass, 2006: 844) in which the relationship with the dead is neither comforting nor positive. In such instances, the living

must actively perform a ritual at the grave in order to sever or transform the tie. The interlocutor's mention of fear, the ritual confrontation and the bodily consequences – *limping in the cemetery* – emphasise the affective and physical intensity of such experiences. This example shows that the relationship with the dead is not always benign or comforting; it can be unsettling, even physically disturbing. The ritual act advised by the priest: visiting the grave, reprimanding the deceased and lighting a candle, may serve as a symbolic form of closure, functioning as a vernacular exorcism. Importantly, this act is not merely spontaneous but vernacularly guided, with the priest – unusually for the Protestant tradition – playing a crucial role as a ritual specialist who bridges the gap between Christian and vernacular cosmology. The role of the priest is particularly interesting and contradictory. As a Lutheran clergyman, he represents institutional religion, but his advice resonates with local vernacular religion, illustrating the intertwining of official religious and vernacular epistemologies, where the boundaries between formal theology and vernacular practice are fluid rather than fixed. The narrative moves seamlessly from ghostly visitations to black magic, bioenergetics and spiritual cleansing, all as part of a continuum of spiritual suffering and healing. This illustrates how the dead, spiritual harm and misfortune are conceptually linked in vernacular ontologies. The mention of “bioenergetics” and “cleansing” suggests what Hamilton (2000) calls a “pick-and-mix religion” in which various actors (priests, healers, energy practitioners) offer different explanations and solutions.

The ghostly husband, who continues to violently threaten his wife even after death, exemplifies a dynamic in which male authority and violence extend beyond the grave, thereby inviting a gendered reading. The woman must perform a ritual of empowerment in order to regain control and sever the bond. This opens up the analysis of domestic hauntings as gendered power struggles in which the dead male figure retains coercive power, and the widow must perform a kind of resistance. As Koski (2018: 62) argues, ritualisation is often necessary in liminal, transformative processes, whether in gendered relationships, in interactions between humans and the natural world, or at the boundary between the living and the dead.

The case demonstrates how the perceived agency of the dead can manifest as a form of unresolved conflict, and how the cemetery provides a spatial framework for addressing this. It also highlights the entanglement of institutional religion and vernacular practice, with the priest acting not just as a Christian authority but as a local ritual specialist navigating between cosmologies. Furthermore, the gendered dimension of posthumous haunting points to how power imbalances in life may continue after death, requiring ritual resolution. Here, the cemetery becomes a stage for confrontation, healing and the renegotiation of relational boundaries between the living and the dead. Below is another example similar to the first, except that in this case a Catholic priest was involved.

Interlocutor SK093: *You know ... when my husband died, may God punish me if I'm lying, it's no wonder we didn't really get along. He had already been buried for three months. One evening, I wasn't feeling well, so I lay down on the couch for a while. I dozed off, and then suddenly, he came ...*

and he started pulling the blanket off me. I thought, what is this now? It went on like that for almost four months. Then I went to the priest and told him what was happening to me. And let anyone say this isn't real! I tried everything, but I never would've imagined it. You could even see a shadow where he was standing. You could feel it directly. Then the priest came and blessed the whole apartment. We also went to the cemetery, where we have a family tomb, and he sprinkled holy water there too. After that, some time passed, and nothing happened anymore. But you have no idea what torment I went through.

SK: *Why do you think he was doing that?*

Interlocutor SK093: *I don't know why. But a lot of people say this happens.*

SK: *What did the priest say?*

Interlocutor SK093: *The priest said: "This is how it is, the way you live with someone, how they treat you, how you treat them ... that's how it continues." But ... I don't know. I said to myself: Look at what's happening to me. And my neighbour in [neighbouring village]. Her husband died when they were in the forest collecting firewood. He was on the cart, fell into the pile and died. And when I told her what was happening to me, she said the same thing had happened to her. "I went through the same", she told me. And it's not just one case, there are many. And people say that when you come home, you can really feel that shadow or something ... I never would have imagined it. (Interlocutor SK093, female, 1953, 17.5.2024)*

In both cases, the nocturnal visit to the cemetery was intentional, as it was believed that only at night could the relationship with the dead be resolved and the haunting brought to an end. The timing was therefore just as important as the ritual itself. In both examples, the deceased in question were known to the living and the encounter with them was not interpreted as supernatural, but as a necessary act that enabled the living to carry on with their lives. Even if the encounter was upsetting at first, it had a positive long-term effect as it brought emotional release and liberation. It is noteworthy that in both cases the ritual was initiated or instigated by priests, emphasising the role of religious authority in guiding these practices. The nocturnal setting was a crucial element as it enhanced the intentionality of the encounter and allowed for a more direct confrontation with the dead. Thus, the cemetery at night becomes an unsettling place intended only for certain individuals under specific conditions.

Warnings against visiting cemeteries at night are not uncommon. Such cautionary behaviour reflects broader cultural understandings of these places. In numerous folk narratives, as Koski (2018) describes, cemeteries and churchyards at night become places where the worlds of the living and the dead intersect – but never without consequence. Sacredness intensifies at night, and the marked otherness of these places becomes more pronounced. As scholars have noted, no place is sacred in and of itself; it becomes sacred through people's actions, ritual behaviour, and collective understandings (Bossuyt, 2005; Hamilton, Spicer, 2005; Koski, 2018: 55). Through these rituals, cemeteries are shaped as

contested yet transformative places, where fear, conflict and ritualized resolution together articulate the enduring agency of the dead in structuring spatial and emotional life.

CONCLUSION

Cemeteries in north-eastern Slovenia are not only sites of burial and remembrance but also landscapes in which the dead act as emotional, moral and ritual agents. Approached as deathscapes, they emerge through narratives, gestures of care, and situated practices such as grave tending, lighting candles, prayer, communication, or confrontation. These acts do not simply express emotion. They also shape the cemetery as a place where relationships with the dead are maintained, changed, or sometimes brought to an end. The paper distinguishes between *relational continuities*, in which comforting presences extend intimacy and care, and *relational disruptions*, in which troubling hauntings demand ritual resolution. In both cases, cemeteries are shaped by the interplay of official and vernacular religion: priests act as ritual specialists within local cosmologies, while everyday practices of address and interpretation reinforce the agency of the dead in communal life. Conceptually, this article reframes the *continuing bonds* grief model by situating relationships with the dead in place-based practice, showing that bonds persist in embodied and spatial encounters. It extends scholarship that has focused on corpses and funerary artefacts, demonstrating how spirits themselves are perceived as co-producers of place.

Across the three thematic sections, cemeteries appear as places of complex relationality between the living and the dead. *Relational encounters* encompasses spontaneous, intentional, or ritualised forms of engagement in which the deceased provide comfort, guidance, support or reassurance to the living, most often involving the known dead. *Spatial practices* highlight the moral and social dimensions of care: tending graves expresses ongoing relational continuity and obligation towards the dead, yet it is also shaped by communal expectations regarding order and respectability. *Nocturnal encounters* introduce a different affective register: spontaneous meetings with the unknown dead evoke fear or unease, whereas intentional ones, often linked to broken bonds, can bring eventual release or transformation.

Taken together, cemeteries emerge as moral and emotional landscapes where the agency of the dead unfolds along multiple axes: between known and unknown dead, and between everyday care and ritual confrontation. The dead act as emotional agents who comfort or unsettle, as moral agents who impose obligations, and as spatial agents who help constitute cemeteries as communicative places. Encounters with the dead often arise when the living are in need, seeking consolation, guidance, or reconciliation. Such appearances are relationally activated rather than random, reaffirming cemeteries as spaces of reciprocity and negotiation. Plural and ambivalent, they are tranquil by day yet uncanny at night.

Understanding cemeteries as processual, relational places invites scholars and practitioners to rethink design, maintenance, and ritual provision not as static amenities but as supports for ongoing relations. This perspective also extends beyond the cemetery: similar spatial logics appear in home shrines and memorials (see e.g. Wojtkowiak, Venbrux, 2010),

dreamscapes (see e.g. Ivnik, 2025), roadside memorials (see e.g. Collins, Opie, 2010) and other natural settings in which the dead are sensed and addressed. Attending to these *geographies of presence* helps explain how communities negotiate loss, relationship, belonging and memory, and how the dead continue to participate in the making of place and the shaping of the emotional and moral life of the living.

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STATEMENT ON RESEARCH DATA MANAGEMENT

The article is based on research data stored in the author's personal archive, which will be deposited later this year in the Social Science Data Archives (ADP – Arhiv družboslovnih podatkov; <https://www.adp.fdv.uni-lj.si/en/>), where it will be accessible, to a limited extent, for scientific and research purposes only.

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MRTVI KOT USTVARJALCI PROSTORA: POKOPALIŠČA KOT ČUSTVENI, MORALNI IN RITUALNI PROSTORI

Članek obravnava pokopališča v severovzhodni Sloveniji kot pokrajine smrti, v katerih umrli delujejo kot čustveni, moralni in ritualni akterji. Na podlagi desetmesečnega etnografskega terenskega dela, izvedenega leta 2024 v 24 vaseh, članek analizira, kako se odnosi z umrlimi ohranjajo, preoblikujejo ali prekinjajo skozi prostorske prakse, afektivne izkušnje in ritualna dejanja. Posebna pozornost je namenjena obiskovanju grobov, urejanju pokopališč, prižiganju sveč, pogovorom z umrlimi ter izkušnjam njihove prisotnosti. Članek pokaže, da pokopališča delujejo kot kraji kontinuiranih vezi, kjer živi iščejo tolažbo, oporo, nasvete ali razrešitev nerešenih odnosov. Hkrati pa nekatere izkušnje, zlasti nočna srečanja in pripovedi o motečih umrlih, razkrivajo tudi neprijetne razsežnosti teh vezi, kjer se nerešeni odnosi raztezajo onkraj smrti in zahtevajo ritualno posredovanje. Na pojmovni ravni članek na novo opredeli model kontinuiranih vezi (ang. *continuing bonds model*) skozi prostorsko perspektivo ter pokaže, da vezi z umrlimi ne vztrajajo le v spominu, temveč tudi v utelešenih, krajevno umeščenih praksah. S tem prispevek razširja razumevanje *deathscapes*, saj v ospredje postavlja delovanje umrlih pri oblikovanju pokopališč kot večplastnih, ambivalentnih in čustveno nabitih prostorov v središču vaškega življenja.

The Revenge of the Rejected – The Rise, Fall and Background Context of Icelandic Beliefs in Supernatural Family Followers¹

—Terry Gunnell—

Buildings in Iceland in the past tended to have a limited lifespan resulting in the fact that beliefs in ghosts or spirits associated with buildings also used to be limited. Instead of such beliefs, Iceland has numerous legends about spirits that attach themselves to particular families, causing a wide range of problems over a number of generations. Interestingly enough, such beliefs do not seem to be encountered in neighbouring countries. This article contains an overview of the legends concerning these spirits, commonly referred to as *mórar* (peat-reds: male) and *skottur* (tasselled hats: female), which sometimes have a background in the mistreatment of the poor by those who are wealthier, or the rejection of an unwanted lover. Attention is paid to the nature and distribution of these legends, the potential reasons for their apparent uniqueness, and why these beliefs seem to be dwindling (but not totally disappearing) in modern Icelandic society.

KEYWORDS: Icelandic legends, memorates, family ghosts, clothing, legend distribution, *mórar*, *skottur*, folk beliefs

Stavbe na Islandiji so imele v preteklosti običajno kratko življenjsko dobo, zaradi česar so bila tudi verovanja v duhove ali prikazni, povezane s stavbami, precej omejena. Namesto takšnih verovanj pa Islandija pozna številne legende o duhovih, ki se navežejo na določene družine in skozi več generacij povzročajo različne težave. Zanimivo je, da podobnih verovanj ne zasledimo v sosednjih državah. Članek podaja pregled legend o teh duhovih, ki jih običajno imenujejo *mórar* (»šotno-rdeči«, moški) in *skottur* (»resasti klobuki«, ženske). Njihov izvor je včasih povezan s slabim ravnanjem bogatejših do revnih ali z zavrnitvijo nezaželenega ljubimca. Posebna pozornost je namenjena značilnostim in razširjenosti teh legend, možnim razlogom za njihovo navidezno edinstvenost ter vprašanju, zakaj ta verovanja v sodobni islandski družbi postopoma izginjajo (čeprav niso povsem izginila).

KLJUČNE BESEDE: islandske povedke, memorati, družinski duhovi, oblačila, razširjenost pripovedi, *mórar*, *skottur*, ljudska verovanja

The following article deals with a particular kind of Icelandic ghost or supernatural being that is a strange blend of a poltergeist, a revenant, a shapeshifter, a following protective spirit, a raised corpse and a curse. Unlike ancient Nordic beliefs in other kinds of personal

¹ This article is based on a plenary lecture presented on 2nd July 2025 at the second DEAGENCY International Interdisciplinary conference “The Agency of the Dead in the Lives of Individuals: Reasons, Triggers and Context” held at the University of Ljubljana. I would like to express my thanks to my peer-reviewers for their sharp eyes and useful comments on the first version of the article.

following spirits in the shape of animals or people (*fylgjur*), which were supposedly born with everyone – spirits which cannot be regarded as ghosts (see Hrefna Sigríður Bjartmarsdóttir,² 2015) – the beings under discussion here are attached only to specific people and their families. They commonly take the shape of young people or children, and are essentially malevolent, viewed as exacting some kind of punishment or revenge on those they follow. To the best of my knowledge, the beliefs in question are limited for the main part to Iceland, although, as will be noted below, indirect parallels to certain aspects of these beings can be found in certain other countries, especially in descriptions of poltergeists and concepts relating to the raising of corpses or spirits which are used to attack others. The uniqueness of this kind of being in Iceland is partially explained by the fact that beliefs in haunted *buildings* seem to have been comparatively rare in Iceland up until the last few decades, largely because the turf-built houses in Iceland in the past had a limited lifespan and needed to be regularly reconstructed, something that gave the supernatural figures associated with their inhabitants the potential to break loose and run comparatively freely in the landscape, attached to human beings rather than bricks and mortar.

Before proceeding any further, however, it is necessary to outline the ways in which Icelanders in the past seem to have understood the “ghost”. As I have noted in a recent article (Gunnell, 2024), records of Icelandic legends about encounters with the dead taking place on our plane of existence go back as far as the early thirteenth century if not long before. However, from the start, and right up until the nineteenth century, for some reason, those beings commonly classed as “ghosts” tended to be seen as taking the shape of the “undead” rather than spirits. In short, they were corporeal, and were quite capable of wrestling with you, something which seems to have been a common behavioural trait for Icelandic ghosts (Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson, 1998: 143–174). Hence the more common use of the word *afturganga* (lit. “revenant”) in earlier texts in Icelandic, rather than *svipur*, *draugur* or *andi*, which are closer equivalents for the English “ghost” or spirit and have become more common over the course of the last two centuries.

The supernatural “ghosts” that will be discussed here are a type most commonly placed by Icelanders under the general heading of *ættarfylgjur* (lit. “family followers”), and a large majority of them have been bestowed with the names *móri* (male; plural: *mórar*) and *skotta* (female; plural: *skottur*) for female. Jón Árnason, the collector of the first and main folk legend collection in Iceland from the mid-nineteenth century, *Íslenzkar þjóðsögur og æfintýri* [Icelandic folk tales and wonder tales], describes the *skotta* as follows:

[They] had a peat-brown [mórauður] veil/ scarf on their heads [in the shape of] the old female headdress /.../. The key difference was that the female ghosts had the “hook” in the headwear bending in the wrong direction or had the scarf trailing down between their shoulders whenever the headdress is facing forwards. They often wore red socks and sucked their fingers. /.../

² In line with Icelandic tradition (in which descriptive patronyms are used rather than surnames), the full names of Icelandic authors are provided in references rather than just surnames.

Most of the female ghosts have been named after their clothing /.../. The women are named after their headwear and are called *Skottur* or Tassels [or Tails], because their scarf falls behind them like a tassel or tail. (Jón Árnason, 1954–1961: I, 346)³

Later legends nonetheless regularly refer to these beings wearing so-called *skotthúfur*, which are literally hats or caps with tassels.

With regard to the male spirits, Jón Árnason writes:

[They] are most often in peat-brown pullovers or tunics, with a wide-brimmed hat pulled low over their faces or a balaclava which they had pulled back over their heads, and some walked with a pointed stick. /.../ The male ghosts are called *Mórar* because of the peat-red pullovers or woollen smocks that they are supposed to wear, even though they also have other names such as “Lalli” and “Goggur” which are differentiated by place names. (Jón Árnason, 1954–1961: I, 346–347)

One notes in both cases the emphasis on *clothing* rather than physical appearance or behaviour in these descriptions, something that will be returned to further below.

As noted above, not all of these beings are called *mórar* or *skottur*, but for the purpose of my present research I have limited myself here to those beings whose names include these words (as is commonly the case: see below) in order to remove any unnecessary complication. A *móri* is a *móri* by nature, and the same applies to the *skottur*. The distribution maps below provide some idea of the widespread distribution of the beliefs in these beings in Iceland both past and present (although they only depict those legends directly connected to a particular place).

As can be seen in Figure 1, the Icelandic *Sagnagrunnur* database⁴ containing information about over 10,000 Icelandic legends that have appeared in print from the mid-nineteenth century onwards lists over 200 legends dealing with *mórar*, a slight majority coming from the west of the country, most being told by male storytellers, as opposed to females (something that is not surprising given the fact that most of the collectors over the course of time were also male: see Júlíana Þóra Magnúsdóttir, 2023: 50–54).

As Figure 2 shows, *Sagnagrunnur* lists a slightly lower number of *skottur* legends with a similar distribution, and as with the *mórar*, most of these were collected from men. Figure 3 meanwhile shows a comparison between the *mórar* and *skottur* legends in print. One notes how the *skottur* stories seem to be particularly prevalent in the north of the country, and how *mórar* stories cluster in the eastern fjords, something that may have some connection with a particularly popular being from this area that will be returned to further below.

³ There is unfortunately no space to give the original Icelandic of the quotations in this article. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Icelandic are by the present author. For further information on Icelandic clothing in the past (male and female), see <https://www.heimilisidnadir.is/en/icelandic-costume/national-costumes>.

⁴ For a list of all the printed sources contained in the database, see: <https://sagnagrunnur.arnastofnun.is/thjodsagnasofn/>.



Figure 1: Móri legends in Icelandic printed sources connected to particular sites (Author's visualisation based on *Sagnagrunnur* database)

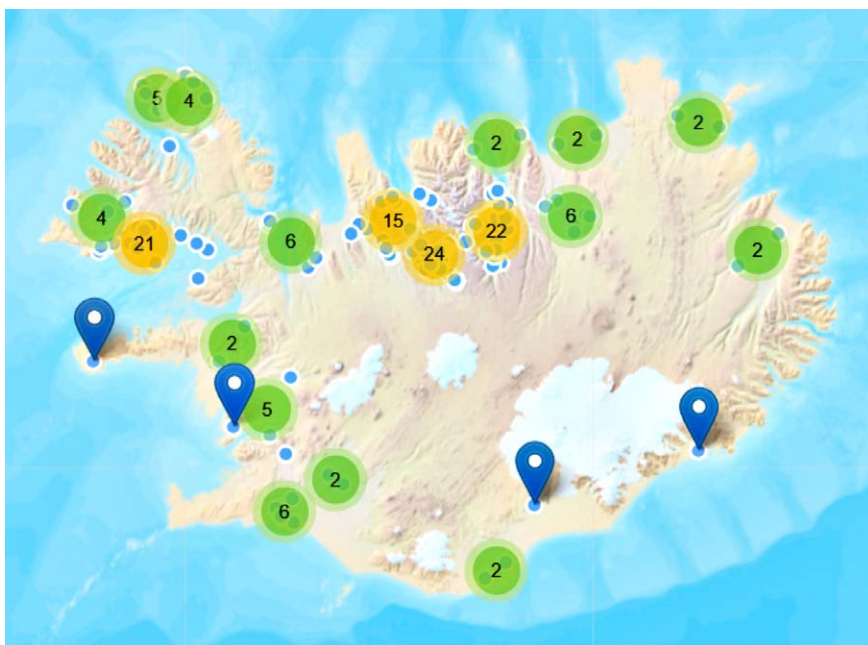


Figure 2: The number of *skotta* legends in Icelandic printed sources connected to particular sites (Author's visualisation based on *Sagnagrunnur* database)

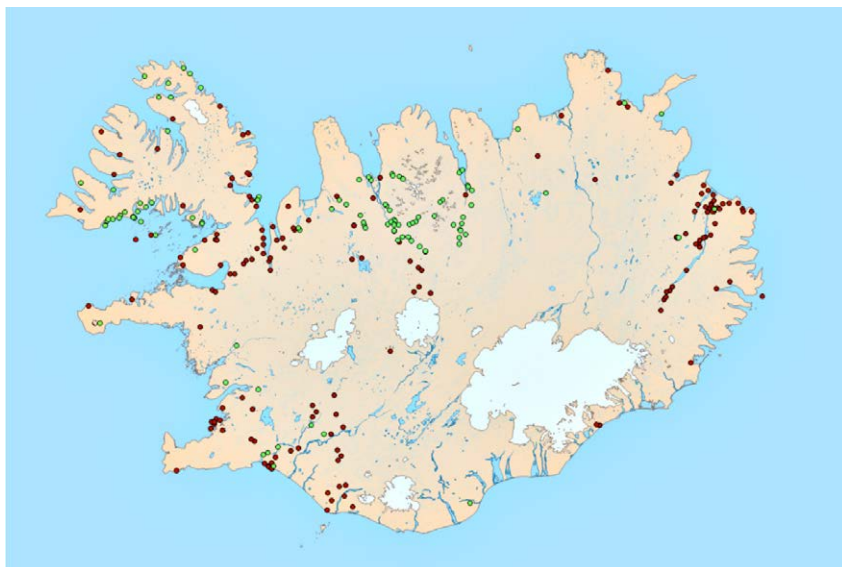


Figure 3: A comparison between the number of *móri* (brown/dark spots) and *skotta* (green/light) legends connected to places in printed sources (Map: Trausti Dagsson's visualisation based on *Sagnagrunnur* database)

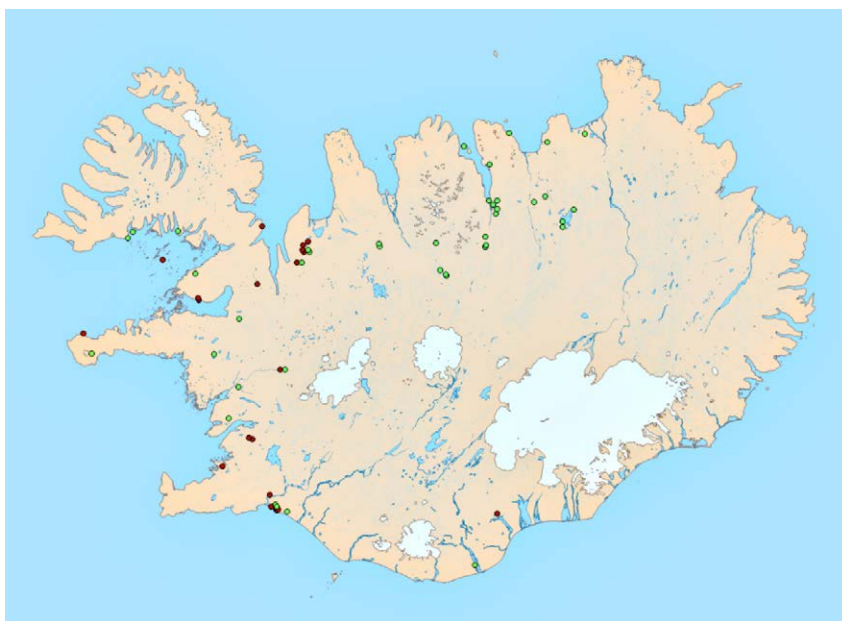


Figure 4: *Móri* (brown/dark spots) and *skotta* (green/light) legends connected to particular places in Jón Árnason's *Íslenskar þjóðsögur og æfintýri* (1862–1864) (Map: Trausti Dagsson's visualisation based on *Sagnagrunnur* database)



Figure 5: The number of *móri* legends in the Arnarnaglean sound archives connected to particular sites (Author's visualisation based on the *Ísmús* database)

Particular attention needs to be paid to Figure 4, which shows the comparative distribution of the *mórar* and *skottur* legends contained in Jón Árnason's earlier-noted key collection of folk legends from 1862–1864, a work which would come to be well-known by Icelanders all around the country, partly because the first two volumes were distributed to many of them for free.⁵ There is logically good reason to consider the potential influence of this work on later beliefs or interpretations of supernatural occurrences. As the map shows, however, even though this seems to have been one of the first times that the words *móri* and *skotta* appeared in print (apart from brief mention of a *skotta* in the eighteenth century),⁶ there was already a wide distribution of these concepts and the narratives related to them around the country.

Bearing the above in mind, we can now turn to the *móri* and *skotta* narratives collected on tape by Hallfreður Örn Eiríksson and others in the 1960s and recently made available in the *Ísmús* database assembled by Rósa Þorsteinsdóttir.⁷ As the number of narratives indicate (once again reflected in part in the distribution maps in Figures 5 and 6), legends about these beings were still very much alive at that time (and if anything even more prevalent than they were in the past).

As with the printed legends, the maps only show links to those recordings of legends directly connected with places. The database itself lists 480 accounts dealing with *mórar* out of a total of roughly 10,000 recorded legends, making roughly 2% of the total, nearly two-thirds of which were collected from men (see Fig. 5).

⁵ One notes here an interesting difference in the distribution of the *skottur* legends (which seem to be largely in the north and north-east, and especially around Eyjafjörður) and the *mórar* legends (which are more in the west).

⁶ See <https://ritmalssafn.arnastofnun.is/daemi/5669>; <https://ritmalssafn.arnastofnun.is/daemi/7175>; see also Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, 2003: 187–188.

⁷ Connection to the database website is available at: <https://www.ismus.is/tjodfraedi/hljodrit/>.

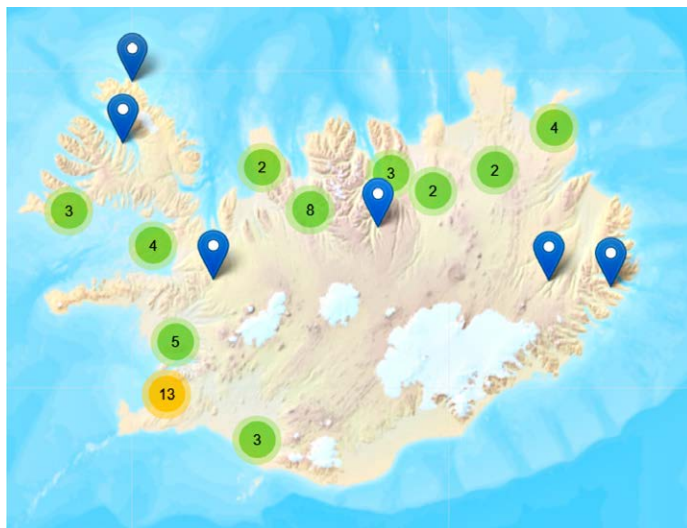


Figure 6: The number of *skotta* legends in the Arnamaganean sound archives connected to particular sites (Author's visualisation based on the *Ísmús* database)

Alongside the *mórar* narratives, a total of 240 accounts in the *Ísmús* database tell of *skottur* (see Fig. 6). As the maps demonstrate, like the printed legends, stories about these beings were recorded all around the country except in the south-east, an area which is not only comparatively sparsely populated because of the rivers running from the central glacier, but also home to people who seem to have been relatively reticent in terms of providing folk narratives (Júlíana Þóra Magnúsdóttir, 2008).

The wide distribution of the narratives is reflected in the equally wide range of compound names for *mórar* and *skottur* that are found in both the printed and sound sources. In each case the first part of the name relates to a particular farm or area, and the two databases show a total of c. 55 *mórar* names⁸ and 38 *skottur* (listed below).⁹ As noted above, several of these beings are certainly bestowed with Christian names, but the general lack of such

⁸ *Mórar* names in Iceland (italic: only in print; bold: in both print and sound): Arnardals-Móri, Arnarnes-Móri, Bakka-Móri, Dals-Móri, Einholta-Móri, *Egilssels-Móri*, **Ennis-Móri/ Sólheima-Móri**, Eyjasels-Móri, Eyraholts-Móri, Fells-Móri, *Fosslægjar-Móri*, Fúlavíkur-Móri(?), Gerða-Móri, **Gerðis-Móri**, Grænavatns-Móri, **Hafnar-Skotta**, Hamars-Móri, Heggstaða-Móri, *Hamarsholts-Móri*, *Hofstaða-Móri*, Hóls-Móri, Hrauns-Móri, Hörghóls-Móri, Hörgslands-Móri, Írafells-Móri, Íra-Móri, Jörvíkur-Móri, Keflavíkur-Móri, Kiðafells-Móri, Kots-Móri, Laugaland-Móri, Langhúsa-Móri, Lóns-Móri, Miðvíkur-Móri, Nýgræðis-Móri, Mýrdals-Móri, **Ófeigsfjarðar-Móri**, Rauðafells-Móri, Rauðamýrar-Móri, Reykjaþing-Móri, *Rettarhóls-Móri*, Seljanes-Móri, Seltjarnarnes-Móri, Skarðs-Móri, Skáleyjar-Móri, **Skerflóðs-Móri/Sels-Móri/Kampholts-Móri**, Staðar-Móri, Stakkadals-Móri, Stekkjar-Móri, *Stekkhólts-Móri*, Svalbarðs-Móri, Svalvoga-Móri, Sviðholts-Móri, Tungu-Móri, Víkingavatns-Móri, **Voga-Móri**, and **Þeistareykja-Móri**.

⁹ *Skottur* names in Iceland (italic: only in print; bold: in both print and sound): *Arnarþælis-Skotta*, Arnarvatns-Skotta, **Ábæjar-Skotta**, Böðvarsels-Skotta, **Böðvarshóla-Skotta**, *Eyjaþing-Skotta*, Eyraþakka-Skotta, Fjalla-Skotta, For-Skotta, Foss-Skotta, Gauksmýrar-Skotta, Gláms-Skotta, Gunnavíkur-Skotta, **Gunnólfsvíkur-Skotta**, Hafnar-Skotta, Héraðsdals-Skotta, **Hítardals-Skotta**, **Hleiðrargarðs-Skotta**, Hlíðar-Skotta, *Holtastaða-Skotta*, **Húsavíkur-Skotta**, Hvítárvalla-Skotta, **Illuga-Skotta**, Kálfa-Skotta, Ketils-Skotta, Kúskerpis-Skotta, **Leirár-Skotta**, Leirulækjar-Skotta, Litluvalla-Skotta, **Móhúsa-Skotta**, Mórastaða-Skotta, **Mývatns-Skotta**, *Rauðamels-Skotta*, Saltvíkur-Skotta, **Skarðs-Skotta**, *Stekkgjar-Skotta*, Viðvíkur-Skotta, and Vogatungu-Skotta.

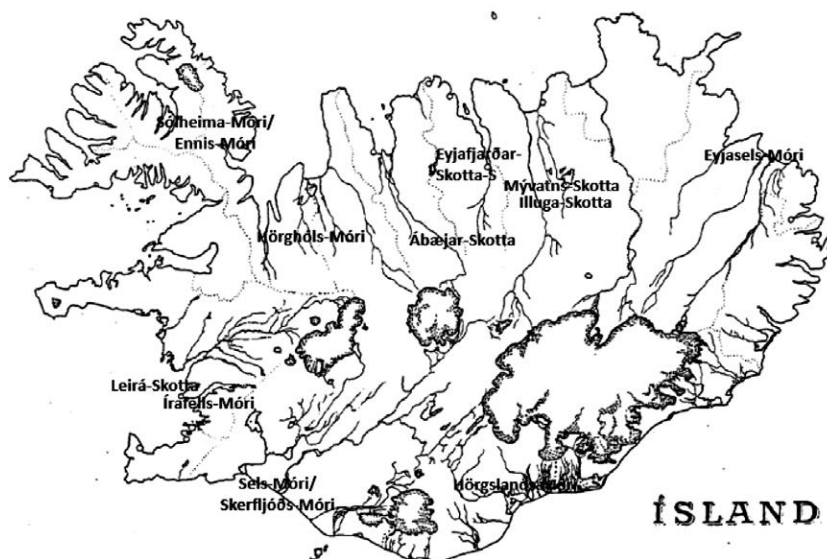


Figure 7: The home grounds of some of the most famous *mörar* and *skottur* (Author's visualisation)

names in most cases points to the fact that this approach of referring to places rather than persons, like the use of descriptive *noa* names, was used as a means of avoiding calling on any of these figures by accident, even though in many cases there seems to be some uncertainty as to their actual background. (Figure 7 contains a map displaying the home settings of those legends about the most commonly mentioned *mörar* and *skottur*, many of which will come up in the considerations that follow.)

As has been noted above, the extant written sources (those accounts listed in the *Sagnagrunnur* database), and the lack of references before this time, imply that the beliefs in question started coming into existence in the eighteenth century at a time when Iceland was reaching perhaps the lowest point in its existence as a result of low temperatures, a high degree of sea ice, and not least the Laki volcanic eruptions, which led to harvest failures and high levels of death amongst both the general population and livestock (see further Gunnar Karlsson, 2000: 171–181). This was also a time at which beliefs in magic and witchcraft seem to have been still prevalent (see further Hastrup, 1990: 198–228).¹⁰

It is now logical to proceed to the nature of the beliefs and legends themselves. Interestingly enough, the majority of the legends in question are relatively short first- and especially second-hand memorates (see Honko, 1964), in other words, personal memories dealing with personal encounters with *mörar* or *skottur* and/or the physical and mental damage and harm they have caused. First of all, however, it is important to explain exactly who and what these beings are and how they come to behave as they do, something that brings us directly to the feature of revenge noted in the title of this article.

¹⁰ As in other countries, the high point in witchcraft trials in Iceland (which focused here on men rather than women) was in the seventeenth century: see further Ólína Þorvarðardóttir, 2000.

By far the majority of the *mórar* and *skottur* appear to begin by being what the Icelanders refer to as *sendingar*, in other words, they take the shape of raised and reanimated corpses that have been sent to harm other people and their families, something which seems to be another particularly Icelandic phenomenon, which I have dealt with in more detail in another article (Gunnell, 2012), showing how such ideas go back to the time of the settlement in the ninth century. Jón Árnason provides detailed, if somewhat gruesome instructions as to how one goes about raising a dead person from a graveyard with the help of a backward-written Lord's Prayer and a rune stick, underlining among other things that the raised figure should ideally be both recently deceased and young (not least because the person engaged in the raising will have to physically wrestle with the deceased figure in order to impose their will on the reinvigorated corpse) (see Jón Árnason, 1954–1961: I, 304–306; translated in Simpson, 2004: 164–166). As noted in the aforementioned article (Gunnell, 2012), to my mind the closest parallels for such beliefs and practices are those relating to the Sámi *noaider* magicians from Northern Norway, Sweden and Finland who were believed to make similar uses of dead bodies, bringing them back to life to attack others (see further Price, 2019: 191–229).

Particularly worth noting in Jón Árnason's account in connection with *mórar* and *skottur* is his aforementioned stress on the fact that raised figures should not only be young (ideally 12 or 13) but also freshly deceased (the latter feature being stressed, for example, in accounts of the background of Hörghóls-Móri, Írafells-Móri, Ábæjar-Skotta and Mývatns-Skotta). Also worth noting is his statement that *sendingar* have the potential to cause trouble (potentially also for the magician) for up to nine generations, a motif commonly encountered in statements about how long *mórar* and *skottur* can cause trouble for a family (cf. those narratives relating to Sels-Móri, Írafells-Móri, and Hörgslands-Móri).¹¹

In the case of the *mórar* and *skottur* stories, the resurrection of these sad youthful revenants is commonly inspired by a desire for revenge on the part of an embittered rejected male lover (as in the accounts of Írafells-Móri, Eyjasels-Móri, Gerðis-Móri, Hörgslands-Móri and Hvítárvalla-Skotta). Somewhat typical is the following account of the origin of Sólheima-Móri (also known as Ennis-Móri) from the north-west of Iceland:

In the late nineteenth century, there was a farmer called Finnur who lived at Skriðnesenni in Bitra. His wife was called Guðrún, and [they had] a daughter called Elísabet /.../. They had a worker living with them called Hallur. He fancied Elísabet, but this was very much against the will of her parents. Hallur was supposed to go south to work with the fishing on Snæfellsnes that winter, and before he left, he asked for Elísabet's hand in marriage, but was refused, and he thus left home with a heavy heart. Soon after Christmas, Elísabet went to the church at Eyri, as she often did, and when she came home, she sat on her bed, and took out her bowl, and was

¹¹ See Jón Árnason, 1954–1961: I, 306. It might be noted that the number nine, like the number three, commonly occurs in Old Norse mythology and folk belief (in a similar way to ten or twelve elsewhere: see further Soltysiak, 2003).

about to eat, when she suddenly turned away from her bowl and said that a peat-red fly was bothering her. She then collapsed and died. And that was the start of the hauntings at Enni. People started being troubled in their sleep, getting scared of the dark, and causing problems when they visit other farms.

Guðmundur was the brother of the wife and lived at Enni, and he was the one most troubled by the visitations; he said that it was a boy with a large trunk but short legs, in a peat-red hooded coat with a balaclava on his head with a tassel hanging behind it. Now more people started to see the ghost in the same form and called it *Móri*. Guðmundur had no peace that winter at Enni. He set off from home and visited a man who had knowledge of magic, and there he heard that several men on a fishing boat at Rif had drowned, and that one of them was called Friðrik, and Hallur had got someone to raise this Friðrik to attack Elísabet and her people. (Jón Árnason, 1954–1961: I, 376–377)

The legend goes on to relate how Elísabet's parents moved away but were continually being troubled by the *móri*: livestock were killed or injured, and one of their workers became suddenly ill. Another worker was found black and bloody in a hay loft, and Guðmundur's fishing boat went down with all hands. All of this was blamed on the *móri* who was regularly seen in the vicinity when these things occurred (Jón Árnason, 1954–1961: I, 376–377).

Other types of anger resulting in someone personally raising a *sending* or having one *raised* for them have a background in problematic business dealings or disagreements in general, as occurs, for example in the cases of the Hleiðargarðs-Skotta, Hítardals-Skotta, Illuga-Skotta, and Ábæjar-Skotta.

This brings us to another type of revenge, which has a background in inhuman and immoral mistreatment. While fewer in number, these stories stand out because of their strong message relating to guilt, making them slightly reminiscent of the numerous Nordic legends also known in Iceland, telling of the vengeful ghosts of babies who have been left out to die of exposure (*útburðir* in Icelandic; *utburdar* in Norwegian) (see further Pentikäinen, 1968; Dagrún Ósk Jónsdóttir, 2022: 332–339); and those legends about the bodies of drowned foreign seamen found on Icelandic beaches, bodies which should be taken to a churchyard, but have items of clothing that are too attractive not to steal (see further Gunnell, 2005). The most striking of the *móri* and *skotta* legends in this particular regard are those of Móhúsa-Skotta, Gunnólfsvíkur-Skotta, Fosslækjar-Móri, Mývatns-Skotta, Hofstaða-Skotta, Stekkholts-Móri, and especially Sels-Móri. Most of these narratives deal with the corporeal ghosts of young homeless people who have died of exposure while travelling across Iceland in the winter. In at least five of these cases (those accounts telling of the background of Móhúsa-Skotta, Gunnólfsvíkur-Skotta, Hofstaðar-Skotta, Litluvalla-Skotta and Sels-Móri), these unhappy figures are the corporeal ghosts of poor people who have been refused hospitality in a time of need, one of the worst moral crimes one could imagine in the Iceland of the past. The following

account of the background of Sels-Móri, like several other narratives of this kind, comes from the south of Iceland:

There was a man called Einar who lived at Borg in Hraunshverfi in the late eighteenth century. He threw out a boy who was a local migrant like so many others who were from Skaftafell in the east of Iceland as a result of the Skaftáreldar volcanic eruptions there [in 1783]. It was in the winter, and the boy was both hungry and had little clothing and died of exposure the next night not far from Borg in a gully known as Skersflóð. Even though the boy was buried, it gradually became evident that he was following Einar and his relatives, and especially Einar's nieces, Þuríður and Salgerður who lived at Efraseli. He is not said to have killed anyone. (Jón Árnason, 1854–1861: I, 364)

Another particularly chilling example of this kind of story is that of Mývatns-Skotta (Jón Árnason, 1854–1861: I, 353–354), which tells of a starving homeless girl who comes to a farm where she is given food to eat. She is then taken outside by the farmer and drowned in a river before being raised to come back and attack another farmer and his relatives. These included a poet who later apparently went mad, and his wife who died mysteriously. The *skotta* was blamed for both.

So much for the origin stories. The majority of the numerous extant legends of this kind available to us in print and recorded form, nonetheless, seem to have comparatively little interest in the background of the various *mórar* and *skottur*, but instead concentrate on the sickness, deaths and other kinds of harm that regularly occur over the course of centuries in the families associated with these beings. Even more common are the experiences of others who are visited by members of the family, the *móri* or *skotta* apparently regularly arriving at destinations before these family members, causing memorable disturbances of various kinds that have served to convince people of their existence. As noted above, in many cases, we are dealing essentially with relatively first-person or second-hand memorates rather than migratory legends; in other words, what Jan Assman called “communicative memories” (Assman, 2006: 3).¹²

As the folk-tale collector, Sigfús Sigfússon, writes about Eyjasels-Móri from the eastern fjords (a figure that has had enough stories told about him to warrant a 160-page book: see Halldór Pétursson, 1962; Halldór Pjetursson, 1977, which contains additional narratives):

As is well known, various people in this family have suffered from mental illness, and that is believed to have been caused by Móri. He went around there in the likeness of a man and harmed people's livestock. Sheep were

¹² Assman compares “communicative memories” to “cultural memories”, the former being memories that those who experienced the events in question pass on directly to others, while the latter are memories that can no longer be verified by those who experienced them, and are in the hands of society.

commonly thrown up into the air and broke their necks or other bones, or were [found] hung, and this often occurred just before Sigurbjörg [the housewife] arrived. Many said that they could hear his laughter from buildings when he killed animals.

When the subject of Móri came up in conversation, some sensible people said that he was like no other ghost, or that he could hardly be called a ghost because he had been walking around the farm on his legs like any other person both on bright sunny days and in the dark night, visible to both those who were clairvoyant and those who were not. He was closer to a human demon. /.../ He was said to have been given life for 300 years. (Sigfús Sigfússon, 1982–1993: II, 261)

The element of supernatural beings physically *walking* around or between farms endlessly is a common feature of the *sendingar* legends (see Gunnell, 2012), and seems to apply also to a number of the *mórar* and *skottur*. For example, Stekkjar-Skotta, as described by Sigfús Sigfússon (1982–1993: II, 343), has apparently walked so much between farms over the centuries that according to witnesses her legs have now worn down to the knees, if not farther (see also below on Ennis-Móri).

The harm to people, livestock and premises caused by the *mórar* and *skottur* clearly varied in degree, and could sometimes be quite minor, as in the following recording telling how:

people in a local shop noticed that some accident or other regularly occurred right before the farmer [from Kampholt] arrived, so often that they thought it unique. It was usually something small: a paper bag holding flour might rip, emptying and ruining its contents; a bottle might break and the contents get ruined and such like. They had started blaming the móri when this happened, and the rule was rarely broken whenever Eiríkur [the farmer] was nearby. (Ragnar Ásgeirsson, 1957–1959: III, 242)

Otherwise, people talk about experiencing strange sleeplessness, increased fear of the dark, and not least actual encounters with the *mórar* or *skottur* in question, which sometimes lie on top of them, limiting breathing.¹³ There are strange knocks on doors or the roof, screams or laughter, and other mysterious sounds such as that of the knocking of a stick. Sometimes someone seems to be “riding” the roof of the farmhouse, or a strange figure is seen riding horses behind family members, causing the animals to behave badly. As noted above in the account of Eyjasels-Móri, livestock are commonly killed or hurt (sometimes having their tails tied together); household implements are broken;

¹³ A dreamer’s sense of someone lying on top of them (commonly referred to as “sleep paralysis”) is a common feature of so-called “mara” (lit. nightmare) legends in the Nordic countries: see further Raudvere, 1993. Interestingly, the same phenomenon seems to lie behind so-called “mora” legends in the Balkan countries. (My thanks to Mirjam Mencej for telling me about this.) Nonetheless there is no linguistic connection between the Balkan word *mora* and the Icelandic *móri*, and the *mara* legends of the Nordic countries. While they involve the same feature of sleep paralysis, they have no connection to the Icelandic *attardraugar*.

and bones or lumps of turf are thrown about. Sometimes these beings are also said to cause people to lose their way when travelling, and they commonly cause dogs to bark and horses to refuse to move for no obvious reason. Móhúsa-Skotta, meanwhile, is said to have had the rather strange habit of eating people's socks and the inner soles of their shoes (Jón Árnason, 1954–1961: I, 347), while Ábæjar-Skotta seems to have certain vampiric tendencies, stealing the bedclothes of women who have newly given birth and the clothes of midwives in order to suck the blood off them (Sigurður Nordal, Þórbergur Þórðarson, 1962: II, 49–50; Ólafur Davíðsson, 1978–1980: I, 377–382), in at least one case causing the death of a man for the sole purpose of drinking his blood and eating his brains (Þorsteinn M. Jónsson et al., 1964–1965: IV, 358). One notes how in this last case, the *skotta* is said to have appeared to a woman in a dream before she had heard about the accident in question.

Another interesting feature about these beings is the fact that in at least two cases in the south of Iceland (Hörgslands-Móri/Írafells-Móri: see Guðni Jónsson, 1940–1957: I, 89; Jón Árnason, 1954–1961: I, 365), food offerings seem to have been regularly left out for the being in a similar way to that which used to occur in Norway and Sweden with farm protecting spirits like the *nisse* and *tomte* (Stokker, 2000: 72–74; Gunnell, 2014). Here, however, it seems to have been first and foremost a means of buying protection. Otherwise, the only means of keeping these beings off seems to have been the use of magic incantations, full chamber pots, the careful placement of knives around oneself¹⁴ and/or other forms of physical violence, all of which could only serve as a temporary solution. Indeed, matters were not helped by the fact that one was dealing with a being that also seems to have had the capability of changing shape, many *mórar* and *skottur* (including Hörgsland-Móri, Nýgræðis-Móri, Hörghóls-Móri, Írafells-Móri, Egilsels-Móri, Eyjasels-Móri, and Hleiðargarðs-Skotta) also appearing in the shape of a strange peat-red dog.

The following account of an encounter with one of the *skottur* (here Ábæjar-Skotta) is somewhat typical of the form of *mórar* and *skottur* memorates, and their regular attention to detail:

This story takes place when I was in my eighth year with my parents in Miðhús in Blönduhlíð. I was sleeping with Þrúður my grandmother and was in front of her in the bed because I thought that more manly. One night I woke up, which I didn't usually do. There was moonlight and it was light inside. I looked into the room [the *badstofa* shared by everyone] and looked towards the partition which was directly opposite the bed. There was a clock there and it struck four. By the partition was a bench and guests often sat on that. And I see a girl standing up by the bench and it was light enough for me to see her clearly. She was in a peat-red short skirt and a blouse of a similar colour and had a tasselled cap on her head. I watched her for a while

¹⁴ The use of sharp instruments of steel or silver as a means of protection from the supernatural is also encountered in Nordic legends in the context of the threat of supernatural abduction (especially of un-christened babies): see further af Klintberg, 2010: 82, 187–188, 197, 281, 299.

and couldn't understand what that girl could be doing there in the middle of the night. I was going to say something to her but then a cloud slid in front of the moon and the room became dark again. I found this all so creepy in the dark that I didn't dare address her. I felt an uncontrollable fear take over my body and dived into the bed, pulling the sheets over my head. I did all my best to wake my grandmother up but that proved impossible.

After a short while, my curiosity overcame my fear, and I dared peep out from the sheets again. The bright moonlight had now returned, and I could see the girl much more clearly than before. And she now seemed to be closer to the bed than before. I watched her for a while. Then, all of a sudden, she started to grimace at me and it was so horrific that I will never ever forget it. At last, I managed to wake my grandmother and told her that I couldn't sleep because there was a girl standing over there by the bench opposite the bed. Grandmother said that I must have been dreaming: I should look over there now, and there was nothing. /.../ She said we should say our prayers and then I would be able to sleep. /.../ In the morning when I awoke it was getting late, but the first thing that I saw when I opened my eyes was a strange man sitting on the bench opposite me. Later I heard my mother say that this had been the Skotta that accompanied this man. (Sigurður Nordal, Þórbergur Þórðarson, 1962: II, 48–49)

Especially noteworthy here and in numerous other accounts of this kind is the emphasis placed on descriptions of clothing, something that is also evident in the following three extracts of accounts telling of encounters with these beings. One nineteenth-century account describes Hleiðargarðs-Skotta as follows:

She was the size of a 13-year-old girl but was somewhat shrivelled and wrinkled. On her head, she had a grey tasselled cap which reached down to her eyebrows and the back of her neck. She was in a black ragged jerkin with arms that reached down to her elbows, and below that she was in a black, short, ragged skirt which reached down to her knees, and this was followed by grey socks with folds and tied deep shoes. Her hands were large and her yellow curved nails reached beyond her fingertips. Her forefinger was bent into her mouth, pulling her cheek out towards her ear. (Þorsteinn M. Jónsson, 1964–1965: IV, 369–370)

A description of Ennis-Móri in a sound recording from 1964, meanwhile, states that he was:

a young boy, around 16 years old, or the size of a 16- or 17-year-old boy, and he was dressed in a woollen coat, turned inside out, and the stitches were all on the outside just like [they were] in the old days, and can still be seen on some clothes, and this woollen smock was rather worn, and reached

down to his knees and was all in rags at the bottom, and [he had] a small hat on the head tied under the chin like a top hat but what I thought was strangest was that down below the coat were trousers, which once upon a time had been trouser legs, but you could call them nothing but tatters which reached down to where the top of the socks would be, but below them were just bones, nothing but bones, and I could clearly see the space between the legs and when he stepped down into the grass I could see where the toes spread out. (Geir Jónsson, 1964)

Finally, one notes the following very personal description of Skerflóðs-Móri, who, when encountered in a tent one night, is described as having been:

the size of a 12-year old boy. He had a small face. He had a small peat-red hat on his head, very ancient in style, and it was too big for him. He was wearing a knitted pullover, with patches and holes all over the place. It was light-brown in colour, but rather discoloured. This pullover was also too big for him and came down to his knees. His trousers had a similar colour, ripped and patched. The socks were grey and with holes in them. He had shoes, which were all worn out. Everything about him was as tattered as can be. What I most remember though was his look of grief and sadness. (Jón Thorarensen, 1971: II, 131)

As the informant underlines at the end: “Many others have seen this *móri*, and everyone agrees about his appearance. /.../ Others that were with me can confirm that this story is true” (Jón Thorarensen, 1971: II, 132).

As is well known, such descriptions of clothing along with other small details about times, dates, and the names of people and places all form part of what Elliott Oring has described as “the rhetoric of truth” (Oring, 2012: 104–152), in other words, they are all features that are designed to help convince any dubious listener that the supernatural event in question has actually taken place. They are meant to be believed and to help change the listener’s sense of reality.

So much for the past and the background and nature of these legends which, as was stressed at the start, were evidently still very much alive in the lives of those many Icelandic individuals that Hallfreður Örn Eiríksson took interviews with in Iceland in the 1960s. Bearing in mind the dated nature of the costumes noted above, there is good reason to consider the degree to which such beliefs are likely to continue to exist in our own time when the idea of visiting a graveyard in order to reanimate a corpse has become ever more questionable (not least in legal terms), and when more understanding exists about the nature of hereditary illnesses in families.

Three detailed surveys of folk belief have been carried out in Iceland over the past 50 years: one in 1974, and another in 2006–2007, the third taking place in 2023, involving answers from over 2,500 people of different ages and genders, and from different parts of Iceland (Erlendur Haraldsson, 1978; Ásdís A. Arnalds et al., 2008; Gunnell, 2023).

As comparisons of figures in the three surveys indicate, even though traditional folk beliefs in Iceland seem to be reducing over the course of time, and particularly over the last 20 years, it is evident that over 60% of Icelanders continue to believe that life after death is possible, probable or certain (15% are certain about this, while 16% believe it is impossible). Over 50% feel the same about the possibility of encountering the dead (10% are certain), and a similar number believe in the existence of haunted houses (13% are certain), something that seems to apply more to young people than the old. Interestingly enough, while the figures are a little lower, beliefs in family spirits like *mórar* and *skottur*, which respondents were asked specifically about in the most recent survey, seem to have changed little over the course of the last 50 years (see Fig. 8): while only 7% of the nation say they are convinced that they exist in the 2023 survey, around 46% remain open to the possibility that they can be encountered in some way (61% in 2006) (Gunnell, 2023).

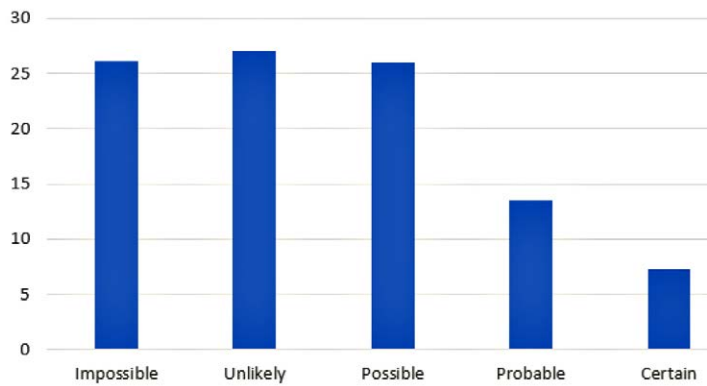


Figure 8: Icelandic beliefs in family spirits (*mórar* and *skottur*) according to the 2023 survey (Gunnell, 2023)

As in other cases relating to beliefs in the supernatural, and in all of the surveys from 1974–2023, women seem to be more open to beliefs of this kind (see Fig. 9).

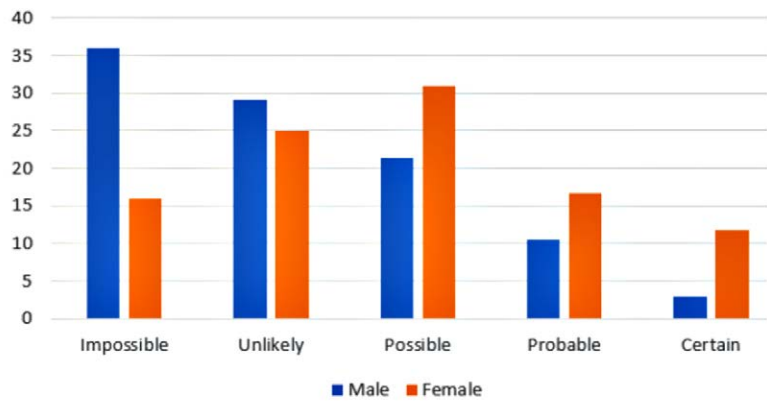


Figure 9: Icelandic beliefs in family spirits (*mórar* and *skottur*) according to the 2023 survey: Gender differences (Gunnell, 2023)

Particularly striking are the facts that evidently fewer young people are open to beliefs in family ghosts (Fig. 10), and that there are clear differences between the figures relating to urban informants and those coming from the countryside where the beliefs are evidently stronger (Fig. 11).

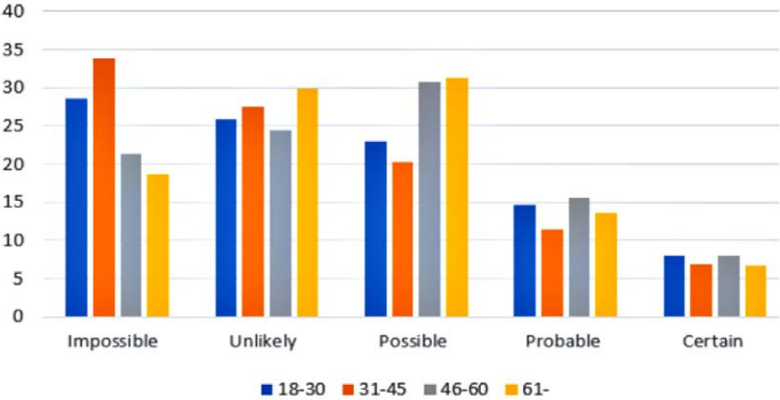


Figure 10: Icelandic beliefs in family spirits (*mórar* and *skottur*) according to the 2023 survey: Age differences (Gunnell, 2023)

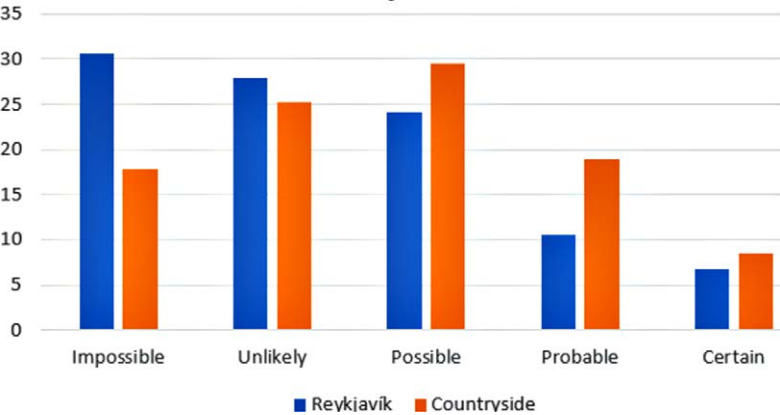


Figure 11: Icelandic beliefs in family spirits (*mórar* and *skottur*) according to the 2023 survey: Differences on the basis of places of residence (Gunnell, 2023)

Firm beliefs are regularly connected to personal experiences, and it is also striking that the figures relating to experiences of encounters with family “ghosts” of the kind discussed above (2006–2007: 16–18%; 2023: 17%) have changed little since 1974 (17%). In the most recent survey, 16% of those people who have had such experiences talk of having seen the being in question, while 34% mention auditory experiences, 31% state they were aware of strange movements taking place, and 40% say they were aware of the being in some other way. The short narratives that respondents provided about their experiences in this most recent survey are strikingly similar to the earlier records in print and sound: They recount how various events commonly occur before someone from a

particular family arrives at a site unexpectedly. Several respondents talk about strange sounds heard in or outside the house. One talks about suddenly seeing someone standing by their bed, and another talks of feeling suddenly exhausted before someone particular arrives. In one case, someone suggests that a being of this kind seemed to have moved into their boarding school (probably with a new student). In this case, students apparently had nightmares, doors opened of their own accord, and bolts were seen moving about. Also striking is that 62% of those who have had such experiences connect them to a phenomenon that they have previously heard about, implying that they were previously aware of some kind of tradition that might explain these experiences, something reflected directly in one person's account telling of how when a jug of milk was mysteriously knocked out of their hands, local people said this must have been caused by *Sólheima-Móri* (see Gunnell, 2023).

All the same, there are also implications in both the recent survey and some earlier records that these beings are gradually changing in nature over the course of time, sometimes actually providing assistance to those they follow rather than causing trouble, becoming a little like a guardian spirit of some kind. A typical example of such behaviour is found in an account in Sigfús Sigfússon's collection from the early twentieth century which tells of a woman who, early one summer morning, was making cheese in the farm doorway at *Sleðbrjót*:

The sheep were at home, but not in the pen. She hears right beside her: "Time pen, time pen!" She does not know where the sound has come from. Then the same thing is said again: "Time pen, time pen!" She can see nothing. Then a third time, it is said more loudly very close to her: "Time to pen the sheep, time to pen the sheep!" Then she understood what was going on and went to round up the sheep which were escaping. (Sigfús Sigfússon, 1982–1993: II, 268)

The account ends: "The *Móri* had been warning her about that" (*ibid.*).

Our recent survey contains further examples of people talking of "someone" of this kind protecting them from accidents when they are driving, or saving them from being knocked over when they are crossing a road (see Gunnell, 2023). Yet other accounts appear to show them effectively merging with the ever-present modern "vanishing hitchhiker" legends (see Brunvand, 1981: 24–40). A good example of this can be seen in the following account of a man who was driving in his car late one night in the countryside of northern Iceland in the 1950s:

All of a sudden, a girl appears in the road, running in the tracks ahead of the car. She has a red cap on her head and is dressed in peat-coloured clothes. Even though the clothes look rather strange, *Garðar* had no sense that anything odd was going on. He stopped, got out and was planning to offer this traveller a lift. But now the girl was nowhere to be seen, and nobody answers when he calls. This, thinks *Garðar*, is really strange, and

when he thinks a little more about the appearance and clothing of the girl and his earlier feeling [that something was ahead of him when he was walking], he senses that this looks a little suspicious. /.../ When he asked around whether anyone had been walking about there at that time, no one had any such knowledge. Everyone was certain that this must have been the Hleiðargarðs-Skotta playing her usual tricks. (Porsteinn M. Jónsson et al., 1964–1965: IV, 372)

Once again, one notes the reference at the end to a previously known tradition. One also notes the stress on the old-fashioned clothes worn by the being encountered in the dark. This underlines the fact that even though the world around them has changed in nature, the Icelandic *mórar* and *skottur*, much like several other Icelandic folkloric beings first described in print in the nineteenth-century, such as the Icelandic *álfar*, seem to be somewhat bound by their original appearance in print. They are becoming a little like a browning sepia photograph. Their clothing has evidently changed little in style or quality, and they seem to be continuing to walk their legs down. Furthermore, it is somewhat striking that they do not seem to have received any new members in their ranks over the course of time, or attained new skills. While accounts suggest that they can ride, and that they occasionally sit in cars, there is no evidence of them personally learning to drive. Like a number of other earlier malevolent spirits, they also seem to have trouble crossing water. Indeed, when Írafells-Móri does manage to get into a boat to try and follow a family member to an island, accounts suggest that he succumbs to a serious bout of seasickness (Ólafur Davíðsson, 1978–1980: II, 34). Indeed, such problems might help explain why *mórar* and *skottur* seem to have had trouble following Icelandic migrants to America in the late nineteenth century according to several of the legends collected by Hallfreður Örn Eiríksson and Olga Franzdóttir in North America. At least one such *móri* is said to have given up trying to walk on water when halfway across the Atlantic (Gísli Sigurðsson, 2012: 437).

If one attempts to draw some general conclusions from the information provided above, it is evident that the *mórar* and *skottur* have a basic background in Icelanders' deeply rooted beliefs in life after death and in the idea of guardian spirits everybody is believed to be born with and which follow them throughout their lives (sometimes travelling ahead of them or behind them). Also closely connected are the widespread beliefs all over the world that illness, accidents and bad luck in general have a supernatural background (sometimes brought about by antagonistic magic or "bad thoughts"). These are all ideas which in Iceland reach as far back as pre-Christian times, although, as noted at the start, in the case of the *mórar* and *skottur*, we are not dealing (at least initially) with protecting spirits but rather something more antagonistic (see further Hrefna Sigríður Bjartmarsdóttir, 2015; Móeiður Anna Sigurðardóttir, 2015). Such considerations would seem to have a faint connection with another set of deep-rooted early Icelandic beliefs in a fate which we are bound by, and in the case of the legends of poor young people left out to die of exposure, roots in a personified expression of guilt that lives on like a curse in a family, explaining all of the negative things that happen to family members and their relations

over the course of time. Indeed, the idea of powerful curses that affect one's fate are another common feature of the Icelandic sagas, and not least those relating to the famous Icelandic outlaws, Gísli Súrsson and Grettir Ásmundarson, that used to be read out loud as part of the evening storytelling sessions held in the old Icelandic farmhouses at night (*kvöldvökur*: Magnús Gíslason, 1977). In short, death and the close engagement of past and present in everyday life have always played a key role in the Icelandic mentality and will likely continue to do so for some time to come. As this article has shown, the family spirits of the past were clearly a very real phenomenon for those who encountered them. Nonetheless, it seems evident that many of those families afflicted by the presence of *mórar* and *skottur* are now beginning to bring forth the ninth generation of descendants to walk the earth since the curses that placed on them were first uttered. It is also clear that, for some reason or another (perhaps owing to more recent understandings of illness and the potential of magical malevolence), new *mórar* and *skottur* do not seem to have come into being over the last hundred years or so to replace the older beings that are now beginning to lose their power. One thus wonders whether there is any reason for these family "ghosts" to still be walking the Icelandic countryside 50 years from now, or whether the time is coming for them to gain some well-earned rest.

It seems logical to end with an account told to me by a friend and colleague who is a member of the eighth generation of those followed by Ennis-Móri in the north-west of Iceland. As can be seen here, while their end may be approaching, it is clear that, for now at least, the aging *mórar* and *skottur* are still very much alive in Iceland.

Shortly after we moved north to Kirkjuból, probably in the autumn of 2000, we dug down for a new water source for the farm. /.../ A new ditch for the pipes was dug to the house running from the water source, and it involved a lot of work sorting out everything in the ditch, putting sand over the pipes and so on. I was working on that all autumn, sometimes with the guy with the digger and sometimes alone.

One time I was working alone on the ditch in the evening when the guy with the digger drove by, and when I next met him, he asked me quite forcefully who it was that had been working with me on the ditch, because he had clearly witnessed two men at work there, not one. When I confirmed that I had been alone all evening, he said that he was quite certain that my family ghost, the Ennis-Móri must have been helping me. (Jón Jónsson, private communication, 1.6.2025)

STATEMENT ON RESEARCH DATA MANAGEMENT

The author states that except where otherwise noted the article is based on research data that is available in public domain resources as well as publicly accessible archival and museum collections that are cited in the list of references.

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MAŠČEVANJE ZAVRNJENIH – VZPON, ZATON IN OZADJE ISLANDSKIH VEROVANJ V NADNARAVNE DRUŽINSKE SPREMLJEVALCE

Prispevek obravnava posebno vrsto islandskega duha oziroma nadnaravnega bitja (t. i. *ættarfylgjur*; edn. *ættarfylgja*), ki predstavlja nenavadno zmes poltergeista, vrnjenega mrtveca, preoblikujočega se bitja, spremljevalnega zaščitnega duha, oživiljenega trupla in prekletstva. V nasprotju z nordijskimi verovanji o drugih vrstah osebnih spremljevalnih duhov v živalski ali človeški podobi (*fylgjur*) so bitja, obravnavana v tem prispevku, vezana izključno na določene družine. Običajno se pojavljajo v podobi mladih ljudi in so v osnovi zlonamerna, saj naj bi nad tistimi, ki jim sledijo, izvrševala kazen ali maščevanje. Tovrstna verovanja so omejena predvsem na Islandijo, čeprav je posredne vzporednice mogoče najti tudi drugod.

Prispevek se začne s kratkim prikazom tega, kako so Islandci v preteklosti razumeli »duha« (najpogostejše poimenovanega *afturganga* [edn.]; *afturgöngur* [mn.], dobesedno »vrnjeni mrtvec«) kot vrsto »nemrtvega« bitja. Nato se osredotoči na *ættarfylgjur*, torej na *mórar* (edn. *móri*: moški) in *skottur* (edn. *skotta*: ženska), poimenovanji, ki se nanašata na oblačila teh bitij (*móri* je povezan z zemeljsko barvo *mórauður* – šotno rdečo, medtem ko se *skotta* nanaša na ženske čepice z resami, kakršne so nekoč nosile ženske).

V nadaljevanju prispevek predstavlja vrsto kart razširjenosti, izdelanih na podlagi pripovedi o *mórar* in *skottur* iz podatkovne zbirke *Sagnagrunnur*, ki vsebuje približno 10.000 objavljenih ljudskih pripovedi (<https://sagnagrunnur.arnastofnun.is/english/>). V zbirki je približno 200 pripovedi o *mórar*, nekoliko manj pa o *skottur*; večino obeh vrst pripovedi so pripovedovali moški (sl. 1–3; sl. 3 prikazuje primerjavo razširjenosti obeh tipov). Naslednja karta (sl. 4) prikazuje razširjenost pripovedi iz najzgodnejše in zelo vplivne zbirke Jóna Árnasona *Íslenskar þjóðsögur og æfintýri* (Islandske ljudske pripovedi in pravljice) iz let 1862–1864 ter kaže, da sta bili obe vrsti pripovedi že tedaj razmeroma široko razširjeni.

Nato prispevek obravnava pripovedi o *mórar* in *skottur*, ki so bile posnete na magnetni trak v šestdesetih letih 20. stoletja in so danes vključene v zbirko *Ísmús*, ki vsebuje približno 10.000 pripovedi (<https://www.ismus.is/>). Slika 5 prikazuje razširjenost pripovedi o *móri* v zbirki *Ísmús* (480 zapisov, večinoma zbranih pri moških), slika 6 pa razširjenost približno 240 zapisov o *skottur*. Očitno so bila ta verovanja v tem obdobju še vedno zelo živa.

V naslednjem delu prispevek predstavi poimenovanja teh bitij (glej opombo 8) in pokaže, da so običajno povezana z določenimi kraji, ne pa z osebnimi imeni. Časovno ozadje številnih pripovedi o nastanku teh bitij sega v 18. stoletje, ko so bile življenjske razmere na Islandiji zaradi nizkih temperatur in vulkanskih izbruhov posebej težke. Sledi analiza narave pripovedi, tako tistih v tisku kot zvočno posnetih, ki so večinoma prvo- ali drugorazredni memorati o osebnih srečanjih z *ættarfylgjur*. Nato prispevek podrobno obravnava razloge za njihovo delovanje: navadno so vezana na določene družine do devet rodov in povzročajo

škodo tako družinskim članom kot tudi lokalnemu okolju. Kot je prikazano v članku, naj bi mnoga od teh bitij izvirala iz t. i. *sendingar* – mladih umrlih, ki so jih čarovniki priklicali iz groba in poslali, da napadejo druge ljudi. Takšne napade včasih sprožijo maščevalni zavrtnji snubci; posebej izrazit primer je pripoved o t. i. Sólheima-Móri (navedena v članku). Drugod so povod za nastanek bitij sporni poslovni odnosi ali medosebni konflikti.

Posebej presunljive so pripovedi, katerih ozadje predstavlja želja po maščevanju zaradi nečloveškega in/ali nemoralnega ravnanja, kar kaže na povezavo z občutki krivde. Pri *mórar* in *skottur* izstopajo zlasti zgodbe o mladih brezdomcih, ki so umrli zaradi mraza, potem ko so jim kmetje odrekli gostoljubje; kot primera sta navedeni pripovedi o Sel-Móri in Mývatns-Skotta.

Kot je nadalje poudarjeno, se v teh pripovedih manj pozornosti namenja izvoru bitij kakor izkušnjam srečevanja z *mórar* in *skottur*, ki pogosto prispejo na cilj še pred člani družine, s katero so povezani, ter povzročajo različne motnje. Posebej opazno je, kako pogosto pripovedi vsebujejo podrobne opise njihovih oblačil.

Prispevek se zaključi s predstavitvijo najnovejše islandske raziskave ljudskih verovanj, izvedene leta 2023 na vzorcu več kot 2000 oseb različnih starosti in spolov iz različnih delov države. Rezultati raziskave (sl. 8–11) kažejo, da verovanje v *ættarfylgjur* sicer postopoma slabi, vendar na Islandiji še vedno ostaja živo: več kot 46 % prebivalcev ostaja odprtih za možnost, da bi se s takšnimi bitji lahko srečali. Prispevek se sklene z navedbo več novejših pričevanj.

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Agency of the Dead in Dream Narratives: From Traditional Culture to (Post)modern Perspectives

Lina Būgienė

Dream narratives can generally be regarded as a certain meta-language, turning the specific individual oneiric experience into a socially acceptable public performance. As folklore fieldwork data inevitably testifies, the deceased hold an especially prominent place in dreams. In traditional Lithuanian culture, the deceased appearing in dreams used to cause concerns and prompt the living to take actions aimed at improving the conditions of the deceased. However, in modern and postmodern society, attitudes towards death and the deceased have altered considerably. Thus, the perspective in dream narratives seems also to have shifted somewhat and the focus is now increasingly turning to dreaming individuals and their problems.

KEYWORDS: dream narratives, autobiographical narratives / life stories, oneiric experience, traditional culture, folk belief, Lithuania

Pripovedi o sanjah lahko na splošno razumemo kot nekakšen meta-jezik, ki specifično individualno sanjsko izkušnjo preoblikuje v družbeno sprejemljivo javno pripoved. Kot neizogibno pričajo podatki folklorističnega terenskega dela, imajo pokojni v sanjah posebej pomembno mesto. V tradicionalni litovski kulturi je pojav pokojnikov v sanjah vzbujal skrb ter žive spodbujal k dejanjem, namenjenim izboljšanju razmer pokojnih. V sodobni in postmoderni družbi pa so se odnosi do smrti in pokojnih precej spremenili. Zato se zdi, da se je nekoliko premaknila tudi perspektiva v pripovedih o sanjah, saj se pozornost vse bolj usmerja k sanjajočim posameznikom in njihovim težavam.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: pripovedi o sanjah, avtobiografske pripovedi / življenjske zgodbe, sanjska izkušnja, tradicionalna kultura, ljudsko verovanje, Litva

INTRODUCTION

Dream narratives can generally be regarded as a certain meta-language, turning specific individual oneiric experience into a socially acceptable public performance:

Upon awakening, the dream phenomenon can be referred to only through the prism of remembering and reporting, as it goes through the necessary translation from visual representations to verbal ones. The dream, therefore, can exist during wakefulness only as a dream narrative. (Raufman, 2008: 19)

Three major stages of transforming the actual dream into a narrative, which contribute to the formation of a cultural identity, may be discerned: “the ‘real’ dream (which we cannot access), the ‘recalled’ dream (remembered by the dreamer and reported to a third party), and the ‘culturally remembered’ dream (reported and widely disseminated)” (Harrison, 2009: 12). As such, the dream narrative is closely related to the phenomenon of cultural memory, to use the term coined by Jan Assmann (2006). The narrative is the only way to turn a dream into a cultural text that conveys the individual experiences by means of collective categories, e.g. translating them into the language of the community tradition. This is precisely what makes oneiric narratives a valid subject of folklore research.

However, for a long time since the beginning of folklore studies in Lithuania, the main focus was on interpreting dream symbols, typically using the popular and relatively numerous “dream books” (*sapnininkai* [pl.] in Lithuanian). These were both handwritten, as well as printed and published, throughout the 20th century and served as a kind of vocabulary aiding the “translation” of dream images as symbolic signs into pragmatic language for the purposes of everyday use and divination. These binary formulas (X seen in the dream means Y in life) can be attributed to small folklore forms and even considered akin to paremias (Safronov, 2016: 16). This “folk dream interpretation”, to use the concept devised by Polish and Russian ethnolinguists (Tolstoy, 1993; Nebzhegovska, 1994), has long constituted the main subject of interest for both Lithuanian folklore collectors and researchers alike (e.g. see Višinskaitė, 2007), whereas exhaustive texts describing dream experiences as such were considerably lacking.¹

Nordic folklore researchers were probably among the first to shift their focus to dream narratives as exhaustive cultural texts (see Virtanen, 1989; Kaivola-Bregenhøj, Palmenfelt, 1992; Järvinen, Timonen, 1992) emphasising their adherence to the collective tradition:

Dream narration and interpretation bear many of the characteristics of folklore: dreams are part of the personal experience narrative tradition and contain both idiosyncratic symbols, and symbols that are culture-bound, anonymous in origin, highly stereotyped and passed on from one person to another. The models available for dreams demanding an interpretation are, furthermore, both individual and part of the collective tradition. (Kaivola-Bregenhøj, 1993: 211)

Since the 1990s, the number of works dealing with dream narratives as folklore texts has significantly increased (for references, see Đorđević Belić, 2021). It has been established that dream narratives can be rightfully regarded as fairly typical folklore texts in terms of sociocultural representation. Ágnes Hesz defines such texts as “memorate type dream narratives”, noting that they usually have a rather elaborate structure: “These narratives may often include a brief recapitulation of the dream experience, the antecedents

¹ A similar situation is also documented in other European countries: e.g. in Sweden, Carl-Herman Tillhagen, curator of the folklore archive at the Nordiska Museet, Stockholm, noted in 1968 that very few narratives of dreams had been recorded from folk tradition (Arvidsson, 2024: 51).

of the dream, its circumstances, interpretation and conclusions” (2012: 141). Researchers talk about “dream cultures”, differentiating between various types of dreams – nightmares, erotic, ecstatic, prophetic and initiatory, which are present in ancient, pre-modern and tribal cultures, and in traditional belief communities (Milne, 2019: 129).

In Lithuania, dream narratives have only received considerable attention from folklorists since the first decade of the 21st century, following the wider methodological shift that took place in Lithuanian folklore research (Būgienė, 2017: 36–40). This included the newly defined concept of *homo narrans* and a significantly broadened understanding of folk narrative in general (Stundžienė, 2008; Ivanauskaitė-Šeibutienė, 2007; 2012). Currently, in Lithuanian folklore studies, dream narratives are perhaps most actively researched as parts of autobiographical narratives, or life stories. As folklorists know from fieldwork experience, our informants can usually be expected to relate one or more dreams that they consider particularly important in their lives. However, in some cases even their whole life story may be constructed as a narrated chain of prophetic dreams that have subsequently “come true” (see Būgienė, 2007: 66–67). In life stories, dreams tend to be depicted as significant events: completely individual in their experience, yet considerably more universal and canonical in their narration. They are frequently remembered and reconsidered or, according to informants, remain literally unforgettable throughout their lives (Ivanauskaitė-Šeibutienė, 2012: 201). Women seem to be particularly keen dreamers and enthusiastic dream narrators, and this has been observed not only in Lithuania. “Descriptions and interpretations of dreams mostly belong to women’s activities”, states Gabriela Kiliánová in her research on a Slovakian village community (2010: 20). Perhaps this is due to women’s lives being traditionally centred upon family and community, with special emphasis on interpersonal relations, emotions and presentiments (Būgienė, 2012: 84). It may also be because in traditional culture, it often falls upon women to preserve religious rituals and social norms, thus constructing something that may be termed a “moral community” (Stark et al., 1996), or an “emotional community” (Đorđević Belić, 2021: 206–207).²

The theme of death is especially prominent – both in dream narratives and in folkloristic dream research. The emphasis is usually on communication between the living and the dead in dreams. Thus, dreams are addressed as a communication method between the living and the dead (Kiliánová, 2010), indirect communication (Hesz, 2012), or a form of communication with the otherworldly (Đorđević Belić, 2021). Communication, obviously, implies reciprocity; in Lithuanian folklore research on dream narratives, emphasis is typically placed on community ties between the living and the dead.³ The dead, their visits, requests or warnings constitute an absolutely predominant topic of the dream narratives recorded by folklore collectors. Meanwhile, variations directly depend on the changing attitudes towards death, funerals and the deceased (Ivanauskaitė-Šeibutienė, 2022: 13).

² Regarding the role of women in ancient Jewish dream culture, see also Hasan-Rokem, 1999: 216.

³ In Lithuania, most research on dream narratives has been conducted by Vita Ivanauskaitė-Šeibutienė (2007; 2010; 2011; 2012; 2014; 2016; 2022). I am greatly indebted to Vita for her unparalleled expertise and kind advice when writing this study.

The present study also adopts the established research perspective that interprets dreams about the deceased as a form of communication. However, when addressing dream narratives I add the dimension of agency by investigating the roles ascribed to the participants in this communication and by attempting to grasp how these roles may have changed over time.

The research material for this study was acquired during several folklore fieldwork sessions organised in north-western Lithuania, in the parishes of Vieکشniai and Židikai (Mažeikiai district) in 2006–2007, and in eastern Lithuania – the districts of Švenčionys and Ignalina in 2010–2011.⁴ The data from these fieldwork sessions⁵ comprise hours of audio recordings, stored in the form of mini discs or CDs at the Lithuanian Folklore Archives division for sound recordings (LTRF). When necessary, other archived materials recorded at approximately the same time in Eastern Lithuania by volunteer folklore collectors were also used, particularly a substantial manuscript collection of dream narratives from the district of Ukmergė (LTR 7672). A wealth of relevant material was also provided by folklorist Nijolė Marcinkevičienė (1997; 1998) who has spent many years collecting folk narratives and other material in the southern part of Lithuania (the ethnographic region of Dzūkija). Nevertheless, all this material is fairly homogeneous, as it was acquired following essentially the same folklore collection strategies. The majority of informants were elderly or middle-aged inhabitants of Lithuanian villages or small towns, and the majority were women. The only differentiating factor is the age of the informants, or rather their belonging to different generations (see Daraškevičienė, 2009). Unfortunately, exhaustive dream narratives recorded by folklorists among younger urban populations, such as students, are almost entirely lacking. One can rely only on several studies investigating beliefs or superstitions rather than narratives (Merkienė, 2002; Savickaitė, 2010), or on research conducted by psychologists (Daraškevičienė, 2009; Lovčikienė, 2019). However, such uniformity of the available material has both advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, it does not provide a broader and more diverse perspective; on the other, it enables us to trace developments in views and attitudes rooted essentially in the same tradition – that of Lithuanian Catholic peasants, albeit from various regions of Lithuania. Let us now consider these developments.

THE COMMUNITY OF THE LIVING AND THE DEAD IN TRADITIONAL CULTURE AS REFLECTED BY DREAM NARRATIVES

The majority of dream narratives rooted in traditional society's worldview are related to the complex of funeral rites, and their successful or incomplete performance. Numerous

⁴ The latter two sessions took place in the course of implementing the research project *Homo narrans: Exploration of Folk Memory*, which was carried out by a group of folklore researchers at the Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore in 2010–2012, and was supported by the Research Council of Lithuania (contract no. LIT-2-31).

⁵ In addition to the fieldwork material that I recorded personally during these sessions, I also rely here on the data collected by my colleagues Bronė Stundžienė, Vaita Ivanauskaitė-Šeibutienė, Vilma Daugirdaitė, Jūratė Šlekonytė, Jurgita Ūsaitytė, Andželika Jakubynienė and Irena Žilienė. I am grateful to all of them for their kind assistance and advice.

studies on death in traditional cultures confirm that the outstanding importance of funeral rites in community life, as well as their exceptional complexity, was determined by the archaic and universal concept of death as a rite of passage (cf. Račiūnaitė, 1997). Only a funeral performed in its full extent and with all the obligatory attributes guaranteed the successful separation of the deceased from the living and protected them from the fate of hostages trapped between this world and the next. Thus, the appearance of the dead in dreams and their explicit or implicit requests and demands were inevitably regarded as evidence that the funeral ritual had been improperly performed or not fully completed. Therefore, the appearance of the deceased in dreams could be perceived as both undesirable – as it signalled that the dead were lacking something (cf. Kiliánova, 2010: 13–14; Dorđević Belić, 2021: 198) – and benevolent, as it enabled the living to set things right: to complete unfinished rites, to provide missing items (mostly clothing or footwear that had not been put on properly prior to burial), or to settle the deceased person's debts – so that they could rest in peace. In any event, in traditional societies, the main concern of the living was ensuring the wellbeing of the deceased. The underlying aspiration remained unchanged for centuries – namely, to restore order, ensure peace for the deceased, and establish a proper connection between the living and the dead (Ivanauskaitė-Šeibutienė, 2022: 13).

In traditional Lithuanian culture, it was strictly forbidden to ask for the deceased to appear in one's dreams, since the main objective of the funeral was to clearly separate them from the living. Only the deceased could determine *when* and *whether* to enter the dreams of the living; otherwise, their appearance was regarded as menacing and even dangerous. The following dream narrative, recorded in 2006 from Zuzana, a Samogitian⁶ woman born in 1924, recounts how upset she was that her neighbour had dreamt of her diseased mother while she herself had not, and the situation that ensued:

I felt so angry and heartbroken... You see, I missed my mother so much, I wanted so badly to see her. I did not have a husband, I was so lonely. So I was thinking, why did she appear to others, and not me? /.../ And I did dream of her at night. As if, you see, I wanted her so much, so my mother did come back. She entered the room, wearing a scarf, dressed in a thick coat. /.../ And I did not know what to do. Me and my sister, we looked at each other [in the dream], wondering what we should do. We were so scared! /.../ I moved, I wanted to invite her closer, but then she disappeared. /.../ Then I realised that I did not have to ask her to appear. Things were just the way they had to be /.../ and I had no business bothering her and crying for her to come back. /.../ She showed me this clearly. (LTRF md 135/34/)⁷

⁶ Samogitia is the western part of Lithuania, characterised by a distinct dialect and certain ethnographic peculiarities.

⁷ Unless otherwise indicated, the translations of the quotations from Lithuanian to English are by the author.

Sometimes, excessive crying for the departed and requests for them to come back were due to the difficult, unbearable life of the surviving family, but in that case, it was believed that the returning deceased might cause harm:

People say: if a person has died, and you've buried them, you should not cry and call for them. My mum used to cry for my deceased father very much. She was left alone with small children and could hardly cope. Whenever something bad happened, she would start crying: "Please, come back at least in the darkness of the night, show yourself, help me..." When she cried like this, I would wrap my head in a sheet and wish for him not to appear because I felt so scared. People say that if you cry for the deceased very much, they will appear, but instead of doing anything good, they will do bad things. (Marcinkevičienė, 1998: 183)

Likewise, it was forbidden to weep or grieve excessively, especially for one's deceased children,⁸ as they would then have to be wet or carry buckets of water, which worsened their conditions in the afterlife and angered them:

There was this woman in our neighbourhood, and she had lost her 14-year-old son. You know what she did? She kept crying and crying and crying. And then she dreamt of her son. In her dream, she saw everyone walking, and her son was the last one in line, since he was carrying two buckets of water, and he was completely wet. She approached him and offered to carry those buckets for him, since he looked so tired. And he responded by ordering her to escape because he might tear her apart! "Look how the others are walking nicely, and I am completely wet. I cannot carry this water all the time!" Waking up, the woman went and confessed to a priest. The priest told her to stop crying, immediately. (LTRF cd 204/22/)⁹

However, if the deceased appeared in dreams of their own accord, members of traditional society interpreted this as meaning that they required something: the living had to take action to ease the fate of the departed. Such requests were regarded as particularly serious and given priority over the needs and wishes of the living. One of the most vivid examples is another story recorded from the same woman named Zuzana. She dreamt of her deceased acquaintance. She talked to him in her dream, although she was aware (while still dreaming!) that he had passed away. She asked him what he wanted. He responded by asking her to order a Mass for him, and moreover, to pay 30 rubles for the Mass (much more than usual). Zuzana commented that her monthly salary at that

⁸ On the contrary, children were expected to grieve and mourn for their deceased parents, as it was believed that children's tears helped their souls in purgatory (Marcinkevičienė, 1997: 21).

⁹ Ágnes Hesz describes similar prohibitions of prolonged or ostentatious grieving existing also in Hungarian culture; according to her, dream narratives of this kind were used with normative intent (2012: 144).

time was only 70 rubles. *“I do not part with my money quite so easily!”* she remarked, continuing to describe how she tried to negotiate the price in her dream, advising the deceased person to turn to his former girlfriend instead, and so on. When she woke up and told her brother, he ordered her to take the requested sum to the church, as *“you cannot play games with the departed!”* (LTRF md 135/33/). This story is echoed by another, recorded from Aniceta, an 80-year-old woman, who told us in 2006 about a dream in which she encountered her deceased friend, who asked her to remind his parents that they still had not paid a certain woman for her services. *“Aniceta, I am now dead”*, said her friend in the dream. Afterwards, she wrote a letter to his parents, the debt was paid, and then she dreamt of him again. *“Aniceta, I am now happy thanks to you!”* he proclaimed (LTRF md 125/13/).

Sometimes, the request to set things right might be conveyed in a dream even before the burial, as in the following example:

A good acquaintance of mine received a message late in the evening, informing her that her uncle, to whom she was very close, had passed away. That same night she dreamt her uncle asking her to help, since he had been laid in the coffin dressed in a jacket that was torn at the back, and he could not appear at the Last Judgement in such attire. The following morning, the girl went to her deceased uncle's house and told his wife about her dream. The woman shook her head in anguish, lamenting: “Oh, what have we done? What have we done?” Apparently, her husband's body had become so swollen before his death that it seemed impossible to put his jacket on properly. Thus, they had cut the jacket at the back and laid him in the coffin, hoping it would be ok. However, after this cry for help from the deceased, the family changed their minds and bought him another jacket, so he could await the Last Judgement properly dressed. (LTR 7672/7/)

The dream narrative conveyed by a close family member may also be regarded as a parental behest to their children. For example, a woman from the town of Rietavas (in Samogitia) described how her parents had taken care of the local cemetery during their lifetime. In addition, her mother used to organise the singing of traditional religious hymns on All Souls' Day and several other annual occasions dedicated to the souls of the deceased – particularly those who were no longer remembered. However, one year she failed to fulfil this obligation. Then her mother had a dream in which the deceased reproached her: *“Domicelė, we expected a feast, but you did not organise it for us!”* (LTRF cd 527/6/). Afterwards, her mother dutifully organised the singing and her daughter took over caring for the cemetery after her parents passed away. Having narrated the story, she claimed she could no longer imagine her life without these activities (Ivanauskaitė-Šeibutienė, 2016: 124).

In the dream narratives recorded from people born in the beginning of the 20th century and predominantly adhering to a traditional worldview, the dead are endowed with special agency: they affect the behaviour of the living, frequently inducing them to

take certain actions. Yet these actions are almost exclusively directed at the deceased, and their aim is to improve the fate of the departed. According to the narrators, the most important thing was to decipher what the deceased required, if the request was not explicitly stated in the dream. For members of traditional society, paying for a Mass (or just offering prayers) was a universal solution in such cases; this applied even if a deceased relative demanded something, such as an item of clothing to be returned (LTR 7582/138/) or something similar. As an informant who was born in the Šalčininkai region of Eastern Lithuania in 1915 stated: “The soul does not require food. The soul only requires prayers” (Marcinkevičienė, 1997: 25). Another informant born in Southern Lithuania in 1911, offered this story:

My mother paid for a Mass when our father died. And her sister-in-law had also been dead for some time. So my mother dreamt of her sister-in-law. She saw her sitting by the barn, on the logs brought there by our deceased father. My mother asked her [in the dream]: “Agula, do you know that Petras is dead?” Her sister-in-law replied: “Sure, I know!” And then she went to the cowshed to check on her animals... Afterwards, my mother asked her: “Agula, does it really help the souls if Masses are offered for them?” “Of course, it does, Vincula! Look, when the priest held the Mass for Petras, he also asked [the congregation] to pray for all the family members. This not only helped Petras, but we were all released from the cold. Now we are all happy!” (Marcinkevičienė, 1997: 25)

Apparently, offering prayers and fulfilling other requests of the deceased, conveyed through dreams, were regarded by members of traditional society as matters of utmost importance. Traditional culture provided the means and interpretative codes for deciphering these requests, while dream narratives – similarly to other folklore texts, such as folk belief legends and memorates – functioned as culturally established mechanisms for ensuring the continuity of this tradition.

DREAMING OF THE DEAD IN TIMES OF CRISIS: THE PERSISTENT CONNECTION

Connections with departed family members, members of the community, or just friends and close ones are typically experienced most intensely – and may even be actively sought – in times of crisis or when major difficulties arise. This part of the article examines such situations and the dream narratives related to them in more detail.

Traditionally, the deceased were believed to maintain connections with the living. These connections were supposed to function in both directions – the deceased could also be expected to offer help, solace, or advice and warnings. These ties would become especially relevant whenever a person felt lost, powerless or faced insurmountable difficulties. For instance, deceased mothers were believed to maintain particularly close

connections with their surviving children, helping the orphans through various difficulties. Informants would promptly conclude such stories by remarking that “motherly love is stronger than death”.

I have often heard that deceased mothers visit their children at night. When my aunt Truskienė died, she left behind her 11-year-old son and two small daughters, aged six and three. /.../ During her funeral, the girls sat by the stove, crying. People were singing hymns and the girls kept lamenting: “Oh, where is our mummy? Who will care for us, who will dress us?” This is how they cried. However, several days later, my elder sister was leaving and she decided to say goodbye to Bronytė, one of the deceased woman’s daughters. And the girl was sleeping in her late mother’s bed. So my sister went in and stopped dead in her tracks. Afterwards, she told me: “I saw it clearly. It was Truskienė’s face. She even had the same scarf on her head. And she was lying close to Bronytė, they were both cuddled together. And Bronytė was sleeping peacefully.” It was still very early in the morning. (Marcinkevičienė, 1997: 25)

In this case it is not clear “whether it is a dreaming experience or a vision similar to dreaming” (Đorđević Belić, 2021: 193) but it clearly illustrates the traditional attitude towards the bonds that were believed to exist between a mother and her child. These bonds were believed to be so strong that deceased mothers could allegedly reach out to their orphaned children not only in dreams, but also in visions or in “real life” to soothe and help them. However, the last sentence of the story, indicating that the described experience took place “very early in the morning”, suggests that we might be dealing here with the liminal state between sleep and wakefulness, as experienced by the “observer”. Various memorable encounters and uncanny experiences are believed to be especially frequent in such liminal states of consciousness, when the person is not yet fully asleep, or not fully awake. The informants usually describe these situations as “I was lying in bed, but had not yet fallen asleep”.¹⁰ The same applies to certain particularly intense situations that verge on the boundary between life and death, such as childbirth. Here is another narrative:

When my mother died, I was just one year old. I don’t even know what she was like. I wanted so much to see her – at least in a dream. And I saw her just once, before giving birth to [my son] Petrulis. We still lived in the old house then. I was in labour, and it was so hard, I thought I was not going to pull through. Then I saw a woman approaching. She had a white scarf on her head and was dressed in a grey coat. She did not come close, so I was unable to see her face. She stood sideways to me and said she

¹⁰ Psychologists refer to such altered mental states that exist between wakefulness and sleep as “threshold consciousness” and consider them especially fertile ground for creativity and problem-solving (Liestner, 2025).

was my mummy. “I’ve come to make your bed”, she said. I can still hear her voice. But she did not say anything else, and I never saw her again. (Marcinkevičienė, 1997: 25)

Dreaming and dream narratives, as shown by researchers in the fields of history and cultural anthropology, play an important role not only in times of personal crisis, but also during periods of social upheaval and political cataclysm, when entire communities and even states find themselves in danger. Thus, prophetic dreams involving the dead are often the subject of narratives by Lithuanian freedom fighters, political prisoners, deportees and their relatives who opposed Stalin’s regime in the 1940s and 1950s and frequently became its victims, being tortured, imprisoned or deported. According to the historian Rokas Sinkevičius, who examined these dream narratives in detail, such dreams were usually perceived and described as predicting significant changes in the dreamer’s situation, or political changes in general, predicting the death of people who were close to them, warning dreamers of imminent danger and thus saving their lives, or inspiring faith. Such dreams could often become recurrent, guiding dreamers throughout their entire lives (Sinkevičius, 2014b: 80). In general, dreaming of dead family members in such dramatic circumstances was considered a bad sign, foretelling a person’s death. Some dreams even conveyed very specific information concerning the deaths of dreamers’ family members, particularly their parents (Sinkevičius, 2014b: 85–87). According to the researcher, dream narratives concerning death in the memoirs of Lithuanian freedom fighters generally adhere to centuries-old traditions, customs and beliefs. Many narratives employ images directly associated with funeral rituals (such as coffins, tombstones, funeral hymns, etc.) or metaphorical symbols (such as broken trees). The deceased persons appearing in the dreams of partisans are described as looking very vivid and behaving as if they were alive; they are the agents driving the dream’s action. The behaviour of the deceased persons in dreams is usually interpreted by the narrators in the context of traditionally defined meanings: they might ask the dreamer to come closer or to follow them, or conversely push them away. Notably, such dream narratives usually indicate a close connection between the content of the dream and the dreamer’s physical and mental state (stress, exhaustion and suffering), as well as their emotional situation, such as feelings of powerlessness in the face of unrestrained military aggression or reliance on brothers in arms (Sinkevičius, 2014a: 90).

Another peculiar case, exhaustively analysed by the Lithuanian folklore and mythology scholar Daiva Vaitkevičienė, involves the guidance and prophetic dreams reported by relatives of deportees who travelled to Siberia in the late 1980s to retrieve the remains of their deceased family members and rebury them in their native soil.¹¹ Although these events took place at the end of the 20th century, the associated dream narratives are

¹¹ This enterprise – comprising numerous individual and organised expeditions undertaken by Lithuanians shortly before the restoration of Lithuanian independence, who travelled to Siberia, Kazakhstan and other places to which their family members had been deported by the Soviet regime in the 1940s, in order to retrieve the remains of the deceased and bring them home – is unparalleled and testifies to an exceptionally close bond between the living and the dead that is deeply rooted in the Lithuanian culture and social life.

notably traditional: they are deeply rooted in a mythical worldview and employ symbolic imagery characteristic of loss, separation and funerary practices. The image of the deceased is certainly the chief focus of these narratives; notably, even the journey itself can be inspired by the appearance of the deceased in a dream.

Before making the trip to bring back remains, I had a dream. /.../ one night I dreamt that I'm standing in a doorway, it is incredibly bright, and my mother is spreading a white tablecloth on a long narrow table, spreading it out with her hands. And I'm standing in the doorway and I say: "Mother, why are you doing that, why is it necessary?" And she is just laying and evening that tablecloth, and she then places one bouquet on the table, and then another. And those bouquets are just sticks with some dried black berries on them. She places the bouquets on the table in vases, at a bit of a slant, and says: "I just need to!" And then she disappears.

I thought and thought about that dream, and finally came to the conclusion that she wanted us to go and bring them – my parents – back. And that the trip would be successful, because she anticipated everything, she knew, she smoothed things out for us. And those dried berries, those bouquets – that was their graves. The bouquets were at a slant because it hadn't been possible to bury my parents side by side. My father lay about five or six meters away from her, at an angle. /.../ Those sticks were their old graves, the dried berries – old tears.¹² (Vaitkevičienė, 2020: 73)

A common motif in such dreams is of the dead complaining that they are hungry or cold. In traditional dream narratives, as already discussed above, these kinds of images mean that the dead are asking for an offering (that a Mass be held in their memory). However, people dreaming of loved ones buried in Siberia used to interpret such complaints as the dead asking to be brought home (Vaitkevičienė, 2020: 74). The journeys subsequently undertaken involved considerable physical and emotional stress, as people encountered various hardships: long distances covered on foot in harsh weather, hostility from the locals, the impossible task of locating long-abandoned graves, etc. However, many of them recounted significant dreams that helped and guided them along the way.

Dreams do not only urge people to undertake challenging journeys; the dead can also help to locate graves. One such unusual story was told in a 1990 issue of the newspaper *Tremtinys*. In 1989 Stasys Tolvaiša and his wife Veronika, a couple from the city of Panevėžys, travelled to the town of Mina, in Krasnoyarsk region, to bring back the remains of Veronika's mother, Mrs. Dambrauskienė, and Veronika's brothers Bronius and Romualdas. Because, upon leaving Siberia, they had made a detailed plan of the cemetery, they found Veronika's mother's and Romualdas's graves easily.

¹² Here and further, the dream narratives quoted from D. Vaitkevičienė's study are translated by Karla Gruodis.

But where Bronius's grave should have been they found a fresh mound and a new cross with a different name, and there was no sign of the original grave. After a few days of fruitless searching, Bronius appeared to his sister in a dream and said: "Why are you looking for me in the wrong place? On the first day that you were looking, three tree stumps away there was a crow that kept squawking. You even remarked upon it. Following the plan, carefully measure the distance from those stumps and you will find where I am buried." When they measured one more time, Bronius's relatives discovered that his grave was right next to the new one. "It's sometimes hard to imagine how the dead are nearby and can help us," writes the article's author at the end of the text. (Vaitkevičienė, 2020: 75–76)

Again, as concluded by the researcher, these journeys and the repatriation of remains may be interpreted as the continuation and completion of previously unfinished funeral rituals. They fully align with traditional dream narratives. Moreover, "the repatriation of deportee remains to Lithuania not only completes the deceased person's journey: it also liberates their relatives from the burden they felt until their dead relation's final, deathbed wish of returning to their homeland was fulfilled" (Vaitkevičienė, 2020: 83).

In general, dreaming of the dead during stressful or difficult times in life is not only frequent, but such dreams are perceived as particularly important, meaningful and memorable: "the situation in life brings up the dream, and the dream speaks about life and affects it" (Lovčikienė, 2019: 49). In such instances, the existence of a community "between the worlds of living and the dead people who need each other" (Kiliánová, 2010: 7) is especially strongly felt. It may be observed that such dream narratives still use traditional codes and images; however, their meanings may be interpreted differently, and the narrators testify to a somewhat altered situation: not only do the living attend to the needs and requests of the deceased, but the deceased may also be seen as helping and guiding the living.

(POST)MODERN VIEWS OF DEATH AND DYING

The dream narratives recorded from informants born around the middle of the 20th century or later (during the Soviet era) testify to a certain change that became more obvious towards the end of the century. This change is associated with the general transformation of views and attitudes towards death, dying and funerary practices (see Žičkienė, 2004).

Above all, narrators recounting their dreams describe certain difficulties in deciphering messages from the deceased, or an inability to fulfil their requests.

After the death of my godparents, I dreamt my godmother was chasing me and asking me to come to her. I was so scared of this dream and felt upset upon waking up. I wondered what I was supposed to do. The graves were well tended and a monument had already been erected. However,

it had not yet been blessed. So I went over and arranged for the blessing; afterwards, I had no more dreams like that. Usually, whenever I dream of the deceased, I just go to the cemetery and light a candle. (LTR 7672/86/)

Right after my mum's funeral I dreamt of her sitting up in her coffin, reaching up to me and complaining that her shoes were hurting her feet: "Daughter, dear, my shoes are so tight! Please take them off!" I remember being so worried in my dream, not able to figure out how to help my mother. I woke up still feeling worried, and this dream tormented me for quite a while. (LTR 7672/265/)

The latter dream, related by a woman born in 1956, indicates her inability to react to the situation in a way suggested by the traditional worldview. The woman is still aware of the traditional code of behaviour that such a dream implies (the necessity of addressing the needs of the departed), but she is no longer sure how to fulfil it. Moreover, the emphasis in describing the after-effects of this disturbing dream has already shifted to the dreamer, who repeatedly asserts that *she* felt worried and tormented. Thus, it is no longer the deceased who is at the centre of the narrative, but rather the living and dreaming individual. This marks an important shift that may be explained by a number of factors. Ethnologist Regina Irena Merkienė wrote:

Analysis of the ethnocultural expression of death-related images in modern society enables researchers to highlight the interactions between religion and magic, religious practices and esoterica, beliefs and sorcery, as well as establishing the etic interrelationships existing in ethnic and religious communities, their aesthetic forms, moral obligations and their development in the course of social modernisation and contacts with atheisation. (Merkienė, 2002: 227)

This scholar studied the idea of souls in the popular worldview of Lithuanians living in southeastern Latvia at the end of the 20th century. The majority of her informants were born between the 1920s and the late 1950s. The views of these people were shaped during the interwar period and the first post-war decades, subsequently subjected to the pressure of the Soviet regime's policies of total atheisation, and, after 1990, the influx of esoteric literature. However, their ideas regarding communication with the dead were still grounded in folklore heritage and their personal experiences (e.g. observation of dying family members). The majority asserted that the dying can see the souls of their departed relatives; yet some also mentioned that they can see a "bright light", which should be considered a modern innovation. Nevertheless, none of the informants would venture to deny the possibility of communication with the dead altogether. On the other hand, very few people still believed that the souls of the deceased could appear among the living; most of them believed they appeared in dreams, or on some special occasions (Merkienė, 2002: 228–232). Thus, Merkienė has been able to grasp in her research the

process of shifting attitudes that began in the second half of the 20th century and subsequently gained momentum.

The psychosociologist Audronė Daraškevičienė, who studied popular perceptions of the afterlife in the Samogitian region of Lithuania, also described a considerable rupture in the worldview and notions of the afterlife that occurred during the 20th century. In her study, she makes a clear distinction between the views of the generation born at the beginning of the 20th century, which she calls the *interwar generation*, and those of people born and raised during the Soviet period, whose views were affected by the ideological, philosophical and social factors, values and realities of this period, whom she refers to as the *post-Soviet generation* (Daraškevičienė, 2009: 164). In her opinion, the popular images related to death and the afterlife, which were initially rather “material” and “earthbound”, have generally become much more abstract and less attached to the world of the living. By the end of the 20th century, the soul of the deceased was no longer perceived as capable of appearing in a visible or palpable form (making noises, etc.). The post-Soviet generation regards visions of the dead as the result of the observer’s mental activity. The soul can no longer retain any physical features of the deceased person’s body, and it is therefore impossible to describe what it looks like. The dead body and its features are no longer regarded as a means of communication employed by the soul; the soul is no longer believed to have any relation to the body. This is one reason, among others, why the bodies of unbaptised individuals, or the victims of suicides, can be buried in consecrated cemetery plots. The essential changes in worldview across these generations can be summarised in the following scheme:

Interwar (traditional) generation	Post-Soviet (modern) generation
The soul can be visible, palpable, it can make noises	It is impossible to see or feel the soul of the deceased
The dead can appear of their own accord	Visions of the dead are the result of the viewer’s mental state / activity
The soul retains the form, dress and other attributes of the body	The soul has no earthly attributes and is immaterial; it cannot be described
The body of the deceased may signal its state and intentions, i.e. an open eye may indicate that the deceased intends to take somebody else with them	This idea is totally absent; the soul is considered unrelated to the body of the deceased
Caring for graves is important for the souls	Souls pay no attention to their graves; the living care for them due to different considerations of their own
The souls of the dead can visit the living in their dreams	The souls of the dead can visit the living in their dreams, but this is a result of the dreamer’s mental activity
The relationship with the dead is perceived as mutual	The relationship with the dead is perceived as one-directional

Table 1: Comparison of worldviews between the interwar and post-Soviet generations of Samogitians (Compiled according to Daraškevičienė, 2009)

As we can see, the notion that the deceased can visit the living in their dreams is especially persistent and remained very much alive even at the end of the 20th century (and presumably continues to be so today). However, its interpretation is different. Professor Merkienė conducted a small survey among her university students in 1997, inquiring whether they considered communication with their dead relatives possible. According to her findings, most of the young respondents claimed to have felt some kind of connection with the dead, who could help in difficult situations and offer advice on solving problems (Žičkienė, 2004: 82). The post-Soviet generation still believes it is possible that deceased persons can appear in their dreams, or even ask for something, give advice, etc. However, the prevailing attitude is that such experiences are merely products of the dreamer's mental activity rather than manifestations of the deceased. According to the informants, such dreams can signify the surviving person's sense of guilt, or a close relationship to the departed that still affects us emotionally. Warnings delivered by the deceased are also considered to be messages originating from one's own subconscious:

If you dream of a deceased person, you start thinking that they probably need something. But it's just your belief. Probably [in this case] the living person feels guilty for not having done something.

Dreaming of someone close to you, even if they are deceased, is only natural. Everything we experience in life has an impact on our subconscious. If a deceased person warns you in a dream, this means that your own common sense is alerting you. Everything has a material explanation! (Daraškevičienė, 2009: 170)

The “materialism” expressed by this informant may be regarded as echoing the “scientific” materialist ideology promoted by the Soviet regime, which inevitably took root in the popular worldview. Along with the state-promoted atheism, it significantly affected popular perceptions in the second half of the 20th century, including attitudes towards dreams. However, the effect was ambivalent as the regime and the ideology it imposed were strongly opposed by the majority of the population. The preservation of traditional culture was regarded by many as a form of resistance. Besides, as noted by Gabriela Kiliánová who is studying a similar situation in Slovakia, under the totalitarian regime “many issues including death and dying were taboo, whereas conservative and traditional phenomena, attitudes, and values were supported in mundane culture” (2010: 8). The same is largely true in the case of Lithuania, where the attempts by the governing regime to control even the most private spheres of human life, such as rituals and notions related to death and funerals, frequently backfired, producing results quite contrary to those intended (Putinaitė, 2025).

After the collapse of the Soviet regime in 1991, Lithuania was exposed to multiple cultural tendencies associated with globalisation, including diverse trends and teachings of New Age spirituality. Yet the multiplicity and diversity of these cultural trends and spiritual teachings arguably prevented the emergence of any coherent and universal worldview, although they introduced a range of miscellaneous ideas that sometimes feature in

dream narratives, such as seeing a bright light at the end of a tunnel or beliefs in reincarnation. Thus, researchers analysing the magical practices and beliefs of contemporary Lithuanian students note the extremely strong influence of “mass culture”. Numerous beliefs and “omens” upheld by Lithuanian students seem quite universal and are also found in many other countries. However, when compared with traditional Lithuanian culture, these beliefs and superstitions held by students still display “a certain tendency to continue the tradition. Nevertheless, this continuation is usually adapted to special individual needs and circumstances” (Savickaitė, 2010: 34). The key word here is perhaps “individual”, since, in line with popular tendencies in psychology – particularly the popularisation of personal psychotherapy, which relies heavily on dream analysis – dreams are increasingly regarded as reflections of an individual’s unique mental world and, therefore, as effective tools of psychotherapy. Jungian psychoanalyst Elona Lovčikienė collected a considerable number of “great dreams” experienced by prominent Lithuanian personalities – including historical leaders, artists and freedom fighters. She analyses them from the perspectives of Jungian analytical psychology and James Hillman’s archetypal psychology (Lovčikienė, 2019: 58). She emphasises the significant role these dreams may have played in the subsequent lives of the dreamers and, occasionally also in Lithuanian history. However, it is noteworthy that dreamers, as a rule, tend to interpret their oneiric visions as experiences centred exclusively on their own lives that are intended to help resolve personal problems or critical issues. For example, the poet Birutė Baltrušaitytė recounted having dreamt in 1990 of Herkus Mantas (Henrich Monte, or Monts in German), the leader of the 13th century Prussian uprising. According to Baltrušaitytė, the dream was probably inspired by her visit to historical sites associated with the uprising. She concluded her account of the dream as follows: “Upon waking up, I really thought this had not happened by chance, that I had indeed dreamt of Herkus Mantas, and he seemed so real; it was probably a sign that I had to continue writing – that’s why he appeared to me” (see Lovčikienė, 2019: 54). In this way, agency within the narrative is invested entirely in the dreamer, while the figure of the deceased seen in the dream serves merely as a means of assisting the living individual in getting on with their life.

Unfortunately, the lack of relevant research material in this field does not allow these tendencies to be assessed more accurately. The existing research only enables us to acknowledge that for the post-Soviet generation, the relationship with the deceased is still perceived as continuing to exist, yet its interpretation – including within dream narratives – is markedly ambivalent and diverse. Nevertheless, a certain shift in agency seems to have taken place: in dream narratives and especially in their interpretation, the role of the dreaming individual acquires considerable prominence in comparison with the deceased person they are dreaming about.

CONCLUSION

Dream narratives in both traditional and (post)modern societies function as folklore texts: they are composed, interpreted and disseminated similarly to other forms of folklore. The deceased assume a particularly important role in these narratives, as, despite all the

ideological and cultural changes of the 20th century, people continue to believe in the possibility of communicating with the deceased in dreams. However, in any historical period, this communication is interpreted in line with the prevailing ideas and worldviews. In traditional society, which preserves a rich corpus of beliefs associated with the after-life – including the existence of the soul and its ability to manifest itself in the lives of the living – the focus is on community with the deceased and on attending to their needs through means prescribed by the belief system. In modern and especially postmodern society, characterised by pronounced individualism, the interpretation of dreams and their narratives tends to concentrate on the effects that these dreams have on the dreamer's mental state. This shift in agency seems very interesting and could be quite revealing in terms of a broader cultural and anthropological perspective; however, it still requires much more detailed research and attention from folklorists.

STATEMENT ON RESEARCH DATA MANAGEMENT

The article is based on archival sources (Lithuanian Folklore Archives at the Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore), which I cite in the references below.

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MIRUSIŲJŲ VEIKIMAS SAPNŲ PASAKOJIMUOSE: NUO TRADICINĖS KULTŪROS IKI (POST)MODERNIŲ PERSPEKTYVŲ

Straipsnis skiriamas mirusiųjų agentiškumui, atspindimam sapnų pasakojimų, aptarti. Tyrimo objektas – folkloro lauko tyrimų metu skirtinguose Lietuvos regionuose užrašyta medžiaga, taip pat archyviniai rinkiniai ir tyrėjų paskelbti duomenys. Laikomasi pastaraisiais dešimtmečiais folkloristikoje įtvirtinto požiūrio į sapno pasakojimą kaip į folklorinį tekstą, kuriame atspindi ne vien unikali individualaus

sapno patirtis, bet ir kultūrinė bendruomenės tapatybė. Ypatingas dėmesys skiriamas sapnams apie mirusiuosius, užrašytiems iš skirtingų kartų pateikėjų, stengiantis užčiuopti, kaip skiriasi tradicinės bendruomenės ir (post)modernaus pasaulėvaizdžio nulemtas mirusiųjų vaidmens suvokimas sapno kontekste.

Pirmiausia straipsnyje aptariamas glaudus gyvųjų ir mirusiųjų ryšys tradicinės kultūros suformuotuose sapno pasakojimuose, kur mirusiųjų pasirodymas sapne dažniausiai reiškia netinkamai ar ne iki galo atliktas laidojimo apeigas, dėl ko mirusysis negali visiškai sėkmingai pereiti į anapusinį pasaulį. Mirusiųjų prašymai sapnuose gyvųjų suvokiami kaip privalomi (paprastai tikima, kad mirusysis pageidauja maldos ar mišių), o jų įvykdymas – kaip galintis esmingai palengvinti mirusiojo būvį. Dažnai sapnų apie mirusiuosius pasakojimai būna normatyvinio pobūdžio: pavyzdžiui, juose nurodoma, koks gyvųjų elgesys laikomas pageidautinu – palankiu mirusiajam. Akcentuojama, kad tradicinės kultūros inspiruoti sapnų pasakojimai, kaip ir kiti folkloriniai tekstai (sakmės ar memoratai), laikytini būdu išsaugoti tradiciją.

Antroje straipsnio dalyje analizuojamas sapnavimas įtemptais asmeninio gyvenimo laikotarpiais ar socialinių, politinių krizių metu. Tokiuose sapnų pasakojimuose mirusieji figūroja kaip patarėjai, pagalbininkai, galintys perspėti, numatyti ateitį ar parodyti kelią gyviesiems. Tokie naratyvai dažnai vartoja tradicinius simbolius ar įvaizdžius, tačiau jų prasmė gali būti suprantama ir kitaip, o mirusieji nebelaikomi vien rūpesčio gavėjais – jų vaidmuo gerokai aktyvesnis.

Galiausiai straipsnyje apžvelgiami XX a. įvykę tradicinio pasaulėvaizdžio pokyčiai, nulemti daugelio veiksnių: sovietinio režimo propaguotos materialistinės pasaulėžiūros, valstybinio ateizmo, taip pat – po Nepriklausomybės atkūrimo Lietuvą užgriuvusios ezoterinės literatūros, skirtingų pakraipų dvasinių mokymų ir kitokių globalizacijos nulemtų įtakų bangos, gerokai pakeitusios taip pat ir mirties bei pomirtinio pasaulio įsivaizdavimą. Ypač didelę įtaką, autorės manymu, šiuo atžvilgiu turėjo jungiškiosios psichologijos populiarizacija, įtvirtinusi sapno, kaip sapnuojančiojo individo dvasios atspindžio, sampratą. Viso to rezultatas, kiek galima užčiuopti, remiantis esamais duomenimis, – ženkliai pakitę gyvųjų ir mirusiųjų vaidmenys, į sapnų ir jų pasakojimų centrą iškeliant sapnuojantįjį, o mirusiuosius paverčiant labiau priemone atsakyti į jam kylančius klausimus. Deja, reikalingos (post)modernųjų sapnų pasakojimų medžiagos trūkumas neleidžia šiuo atžvilgiu padaryti vienareikšmiškų išvadų, tik išžvelgti tam tikras tendencijas, kurios būtų įdomios plačiau patyrinėti kultūrinės ir antropologinės raidos kontekste.

Deceased Parent in Distressing Dreams. Dealing with Problems in Bereavement Narratives

Kaarina Koski

This paper analyses three bereavement narratives in which adult daughters describe nightmarish after-death communication with a deceased parent. The narratives are approached with a narrative analysis in dialogue with psychological approaches to bereavement dreams and continuing bonds. In psychology, bereavement nightmares are usually assumed to signal difficulties accepting loss. However, in the context of bereavement narratives that depict life with the deceased, these nightmares do not appear to process the death but to reflect problems in the daughter-parent relationship. Expressing discomfort with a parent's behaviour, the nightmares are connected to an attempt to change or end the late parent's influence in the daughter's life.

KEYWORDS: death, bereavement narrative, nightmare, continuing bonds, family relations

Članek analizira tri pripovedi o žalovanju, v katerih odrasle hčere opisujejo moreče posmrtno sanje z umrlim staršem. Pripovedi so obravnavane z narativno analizo v dialogu s psihološkimi pristopi k sanjam v času žalovanja in k nadaljevanju vezi s pokojnikom. V psihologiji se žalovalne more običajno razumejo kot znak težav pri sprejemanju izgube. Vendar pa se v kontekstu žalovalnih pripovedi, ki prikazujejo življenje s pokojnikom, te more ne kažejo kot način predelovanja smrti, temveč odražajo težave v odnosu med hčerjo in staršem. Ker izražajo nelagodje zaradi vedenja starša, so more povezane s poskusom, da bi hči spremenila ali prekinila vpliv pokojnega starša na svoje življenje.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: smrt, žalovalne pripovedi, žalovalne more, trajajoče vezi, družinski odnosi

The loss of a close family member can cause mixed feelings, especially if the relationship was problematic. The bereaved may need to figure out how to live with the past and how to shape their relationship with the deceased. Dreams and narratives about the deceased have been regarded as a means of processing loss and reassessing relationships. There are also collective beliefs and personal experiences about dreams being real encounters with the deceased, allowing farewells or expressions of love. This article presents an analysis of three personal reminiscence narratives, which describe distressing dream experiences after the death of a parent. While one of the narratives explicitly presents the deceased as an intentional actor in a spiritual realm, the two others are less explicit about the ontology of the encounter. The authors of these texts are three Finnish women who

contributed to a death-themed data collection campaign by a folklore archive. I consider them to be bereavement narratives, i.e. narratives that describe and make sense of losing someone close. I suggest that, as autobiographical narratives, bereavement narratives not only recount the lives of the deceased but also define and perform the author's self. In addition to this narrative approach, I consider these texts in the light of dream studies and bereavement studies.

Questions of coping with loss, continuing a social relationship with the deceased, and processing one's emotions via dreams have been approached from diverse viewpoints by scholars in psychology, the social sciences and the humanities. In this paper, I put my narrative analysis in dialogue with the psychological research on bereavement dreams and continuing bonds. Such a dialogue is not without problems, as a gap persists, especially between the basic assumptions of analytical psychology and approaches in the study of culture and religion. The impact of vernacular traditions and beliefs on personal experiences and their interpretation is generally recognised and appreciated by researchers in culture and religion. We find it fairly common and unproblematic that people may feel the presence of their deceased relatives. Meanwhile, a large part of psychological grief studies is concerned with monitoring healthy and unhealthy forms of grieving. Instead of allowing for a variety of belief systems, psychologists often presume a shared scientific outlook. Therefore, they may tolerate after-death communication only to a certain degree and, for example, regard it as "normal" only within a strict timeframe of the grieving process – if at all (see e.g. Stroebe, Schut, 2005; Siltala, 2019: 200–201; Black et al., 2025: 185). Despite their differences, the results of psychological dream studies are relevant to the analysis of contemporary Finnish dream narratives. The discord between different scholarly views corresponds to the mixed feelings found in everyday Finnish contexts in which these bereavement narratives emerge. In Finland, there is no particular tradition of dream communication that would be generally accepted. The Lutheran church has never afforded any particular recognition to dream encounters and has equally condemned all forms of after-death communication. Even though people do have such experiences and may discuss them with those closest to them, they are seldom discussed in public, as they tend to be rejected by both a materialist worldview and religious discourse. Today, dreamers find it appropriate to explain their experiences through the lens of popular psychology, and oneiric encounters are increasingly interpreted as products of the individual mind (e.g. Koski, 2016b).

BEREAVEMENT DREAMS AND CONTINUING BONDS

Studies of dreams and bereavement have shown that the bereaved commonly dream of the deceased. The majority of the dreams have an emotionally positive tone but distressing dreams also occur (Worden, 2009; Wright et al., 2013: 3; Black et al., 2019: 68, 73–74; Black et al., 2021: 526–527). There is general agreement that dream contents are based on the dreamer's waking life and have an active role in emotion regulation. It has also been assumed that nightmares occur when the attempt to handle difficult emotions fails.

Nightmares should not, however, be only viewed as a failure. Researchers have recognised that not only positive but also disturbing dreams facilitate the emotional processing of loss and may therefore have an adaptive impact (e.g. Barrett, 1992: 107; Garfield, 1996; Nielsen, Levin, 2007; Nielsen, Lara-Carrasco, 2007; Worden, 2009: 28, 171; Germain et al., 2013: 270; Wright et al., 2013: 2). In psychological studies, however, nightmares are often portrayed in a negative light. Their close connection to disorders, trauma, mental health problems and unresolved grief, as well as their maladaptive role in post-traumatic stress disorder, have been discussed frequently (Nielsen, Lara-Carrasco, 2007: 255; Germain et al., 2013: 271; Sandman, 2017: 59–60). Yet, nightmares are also common in non-pathological grief. They occur together with experiences of anxiety and distress in waking life, thereby attempting to process problematic emotions, such as grief. Nightmares can thus be understood as a psychological response to a distressing situation (Barrett, 1996: 2–3; Nielsen, Lara-Carrasco, 2007: 255–261, 272). More detailed studies have shown that even trauma-based nightmares may prompt the dreamer to process the problem and thus carry a potential for balance and healing (Owczarski, 2018: 289–294).

Psychological research, which focuses on how dreams reflect adaptation to loss, portrays bereavement nightmares as a struggle to accept death or to cope with the emotions of grief. When grief is considered a process, different dreams are found to occur in its different phases. Negative dreams or nightmares usually occur soon after the bereavement, and they may express the question of coming to terms with the loss, or emotions of guilt or anger (Barrett, 1992: 106; Garfield, 1996: 100–102; Worden, 2009: 28). However, studies that adapt grief theories to dream descriptions have not given entirely consistent results. A major problem is that the dreams have been interpreted solely as expressions of grief. Nevertheless, dream contents are unique and ambiguous and often refer to a variety of events and meanings in the dreamer's life. Factors other than grief may be present in the dreamer's life concurrently, possibly including additional stressors that may affect the dreams (Belicki et al., 2003: 94–97, 102, 104). Furthermore, such dreams and visions are not limited to the bereaved; for example, the dying are likewise prone to have dreams and visions involving deceased loved ones. Recent studies on encounters with the deceased in dreams and visions recognise that such encounters, both in dreams or when awake, may serve a variety of functions, ranging from emotional regulation and trauma processing to providing comfort and maintaining continuing bonds with the deceased (Black et al., 2021; Black et al., 2025: 184–185, 187–188).

Within the framework of continuing bonds, it is possible to view dreams about the deceased as a means of developing or processing the relationship after death. The continuing bonds (CB) approach, which has prevailed in death and grief studies since the 1990s, recognises that the bereaved often maintain relationships with their deceased loved ones. In contrast to the long-influential Freudian imperative to sever the bond and move on, CB scholars have argued that the dead have held meaningful social roles in people's lives in various religions and cultures and continue to do so even in Western societies, albeit within the private sphere (Silverman, Klass, 1996: 14–15, 22; Klass, Goss, 1999; Goss, Klass, 2005: 3–5). It is also emphasised that each experience of grief is different. While some bereaved individuals benefit from maintaining a bond, others may cope

better by severing the tie (Howarth, 2000; Parker, 2005: 259–261; Stroebe, Schut, 2005; Valentine, 2008: 4–5). However, maintaining a bond has been understood in various ways in different fields of study. Especially in psychology, the continuing bonds approach has been connected exclusively with the grieving process and is therefore expected to last no longer than six months. CB is defined as an intrapsychic phenomenon, i.e. a relationship between the bereaved and an inner, imagined representation of the deceased. The so-called external forms of bonding, which refer to perceived activity of the deceased originating from the outside, have been labelled as illusions or hallucinations, signifying a failure to recognise the reality of death. As these experiences are not controlled by the bereaved themselves, they have been considered more likely to be distressing. Particularly when occurring outside the grieving period, they have been associated with a potential disorder and an increased risk of considerable health problems (Field et al., 2005; Field, Filanoski, 2010: 2–4).

These views have been criticised within the humanities and social sciences. An increasing number of studies have shown that people with no particular health problems have experiences of external communication with the dead. These encounters are often seen as positive and comforting experiences, and they are not only restricted to the mourning period but sometimes occur years or even decades after bereavement. When accepted and appreciated, they are not called hallucinations but, for example, visions (Goss, Klass, 2005: 6; Kwilecki, 2011; Siltala, 2019: 196–199). In qualitative studies, the presence of the deceased and conversations with them have been documented as recurrent and positive forms of CB, alongside ritual and social remembrance and the use of keepsakes (e.g. Hallam, Hockey, 2001; Parker, 2005; Valentine, 2008; Richardson, 2014; Koski, 2016a). CB scholars have emphasised that the bereaved who maintain such bonds are well aware of the changes that death has brought to their lives. It has also been noted that the distinction between internal and external experiences may not be important to the bereaved for whom the bond carries a social meaning. As a social and relational phenomenon, continuing bonds are based on the understanding that even though life ends, the relationship does not (Goss, Klass, 2005: 5–6; Valentine, 2008: 173–174; see also Day, 2012; Ellis, 2013). The gap between different disciplinary approaches is, ultimately, not unbridgeable. Supported by a growing body of research, new generations of grief psychologists have recognised the positive potential of after-death communication, extending beyond the confines of the grieving process (Black et al., 2025).

Continuing bonds are not exclusively associated with happy and comfortable relationships. Relationships that were problematic in life may continue to be so after death. According to the continuing bonds approach, the bereaved may need to work out the problems in the relationship, as they would do with a living person (Goss, Klass, 2005: 8). As each experience of grief is different, I suggest that although most bereavement dreams may concern traumatic loss, some may instead relate to problematic relationships and the need to reorganise them after death.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study is based on written personal reminiscences and descriptions produced in a collection campaign entitled “Death, loss, and memory” (DLM),¹ organised by the archive of the Finnish Literature Society (FLS) in 2014. Such collection campaigns, which encourage volunteers to write to researchers about their thoughts and memories without formal requirements, are a common method of collecting qualitative data in Finnish cultural research (Latvala, Laurén, 2013: 249–250; Latvala, 2016: 407–409; Savolainen, 2016: 208–210). In many ways, the reminiscence writings resemble the materials collected in the British *Mass Observation Project* (Savolainen, 2016: 208). Participants are motivated to contribute for a variety of reasons. Some of them have mainly observed other people’s habits, while others have focused on describing their own lives. Nevertheless, the material is rich and offers an insight into people’s lives and thoughts (Sheridan, 1993: 28, 30–32). The present DLM collection consists of 550 pages of text produced by 101 contributors. The material ranges from ethnographic descriptions of funerary customs and commemorative practices to personal memories of loss, representations of the after-life, encounters with deceased loved ones and opinions on palliative care. In this paper, my focus is twofold: on the one hand, I examine bereavement narratives; on the other, I analyse dream descriptions.

For the purpose of this analysis, I define narratives as meaning-making devices that convey a point of view but need not possess a solid structure. In my narrative analysis, I approach the concept of narrative in a twofold manner. First, my research materials include verbalised bereavement and dream narratives, which are personal interpretations of life events and experiences. I will present a careful content analysis of these narratives. Second, I analyse these personal narratives in light of more abstract underlying models – *implicit narratives* – which form a context of social expectations regarding how one should remember and recount experiences. The term *narrative agency* refers to the individual’s capacity to challenge these underlying models (see, for example, Meretoja, 2022).

The DLM collection includes 17 texts, which present one or more full bereavement narratives, i.e. narratives that not only describe a departure but also reflect upon the relationship between the writer and the deceased. For the bereaved, narrating the life and death of a deceased individual helps make sense of the loss, reassess the relationship and find a safe and permanent place for the deceased within social reality. Such a narrative can unfold in discussions with others who knew the deceased, as a personal process in one’s thoughts or in writing, with a counsellor, or in communication with an outsider, such as a researcher (Walter, 1996; Valentine, 2008: 5, 15–16). In their bereavement narratives, the bereaved often begin by describing the deceased and their death, then go on to the closely connected processes of loss and rediscovery of the deceased. Bereavement narratives frequently include thoughts about how the narrator has coped with the loss

¹ In Finnish “Kuolema, menetyks ja muisto”, archival code KUOLEMA. In this paper, references are shortened to K.

and how it changed their life (Valentine, 2008: 12, 92, 175–176). Constructing a new biography for the deceased functions in a manner similar to a mortuary ritual, creating a new status and identity for both the deceased and the bereaved (Walter, 1996). As not all relationships are actively maintained after death, the narrative can also reflect the deceased person's fading significance (Jonsson, 2015: 293).

In the collection, dreams are sometimes described in detail, while sometimes they are simply mentioned as having occurred. Dreams are subjective experiences that are accessible to others only through the dreamer's description. Dreams can be multisensory, chaotic and enigmatic, and therefore difficult to verbalise accurately. Descriptions of dreams are always interpretations and selections of the original experience (Rupprecht, 1999; Kaivola-Bregenhøj, 2012: 99–100). Therefore, dream narratives sometimes just briefly summarise the content, while the focus is on contextual information and evaluation: under what circumstances and why did I have such a dream, and what did it mean? Embedded within a broader autobiographical framework, dream narratives can function as commentary on and evaluation of significant life episodes. They can be presented as anticipations of unfolding developments in life, or they can illustrate the narrator's innermost thoughts, fears or expectations in a certain situation (Kaivola-Bregenhøj, 1993; Paal, 2009). In contemporary Finland, people often consider nightmares too intimate to narrate. Intertwined with distress and anxiety, nightmares may be perceived as revealing too much about one's most intimate fears or as portraying the narrator as mentally unstable. When connected to life situations that are socially recognised as upsetting or painful – such as bereavement – nightmares tend to be better accepted (Koski et al., 2024: 280–281).

The campaign call included a set of questions to inspire participants. One question was about encountering the dead in dreams, which may have contributed to the presence of 69 references to dreams of the deceased in the texts. Some contributors describe two or more dreams; however, I have generally counted each contributor's account of dreams as a single entry. Contributors typically mention that they often see their parents or grandparents in dreams and that the dreams are always pleasant. However, if a contributor reported, separately, pleasant and distressing dreams portraying different persons, I counted them as distinct entries. Four contributors explain that the deceased do not occupy a special role in their dreams but instead behave similarly to the living. The remaining contributors describe dreams involving the deceased either without defining the atmosphere at all or by evaluating them as positive or negative. Positively characterised dreams portray the deceased as happy and healthy, leaving the dreamer with a pleasant or comforting feeling. In some cases, however, the happiness turns into painful longing upon waking. I have nevertheless categorised these dreams as positive because the contributors are eager to have such dreams again. Approximately half of the negatively toned dreams are defined as nightmares (Finnish: *painajainen*) by the contributors. The remainder are described as dreams that leave a bad feeling or “give one the creeps” (K217–218, 2014).

Number of texts mentioning the deceased in dreams	69
Dreams in which the deceased do not play a special role	4
Neutral descriptions	19
Positively experienced dreams	33
Negatively experienced dreams	13

Table 1: Number of texts mentioning the deceased in dreams in the Death, loss, and memory collection, and a breakdown of these dream descriptions according to the emotional content of the experience (Provided by the author)

In these texts, nightmares often coincide with the contributor’s young age at the time of the death in question or with a sudden or violent death, such as the suicide of a family member. This is in accordance with psychological research suggesting that nightmares are more likely to occur if the death was violent or the bereaved has a lower capacity to process the loss, e.g. due to young age (e.g. Black et al., 2021). However, in three cases, nightmares were reported without any such background. These three texts are the object of my study.

I interpret the bereavement narratives and nightmares in the context of the whole collection and in light of local vernacular discourses concerning death and dreams. I approach these as descriptions of encounters with the dead in dreams; however, it remains slightly unclear if all the narrators perceived these dreams as real encounters, or even whether the dreamer was indeed asleep or awake. This suggests that the exact modality of the experience has been considered less important than its meaning as a form of social communication. In any case, such experiences are not exceptional. Although experiences of after-death communication are somewhat stigmatised in Finland (Koski, 2016b), half of the population finds it likely that there is life after death. Around the same time the DLM collection was compiled, a large-scale survey conducted by the Church Research Institute found that one third of Finns considered it probable that the living can feel a connection with the dead, while 18% were open to the possibility that the dead can see the world of the living (Ketola et al., 2018: 46–47). In a subsequent survey in 2019, which included slightly different questions, 29% of participants reported one or more contacts with someone who had died (Ketola, Sohlberg, 2022: 103–104). Studies of personal narratives describing such encounters indicate that the majority of them are experienced through dreams (Alasuutari, 2017: 180–181; Siltala, 2019: 119). Finns generally view dreams and nightmares as products of the mind; however, a cultural framework that views dreams as a channel for otherworldly messages has persisted into modern times and emerges as a meaning-making device especially in stressful situations, such as illness or death (Kaivola-Bregenhøj, 1993: 216–220; Paal, 2009: 279–280). In other words, these bereavement narratives reflect a cultural narrative that things left unsaid before death may be expressed afterwards.

BEREAVEMENT NARRATIVES CONTAINING DISTRESSING DREAMS

The three texts that I chose to focus on were the only ones in the collection in which the narrator 1) explicitly describes or mentions recurrent interaction with a deceased parent in bad dreams or nightmares, and 2) describes the context and the relationship with that parent. All three narrators identify as female. By the time they wrote these texts, the women had already passed through the difficult period that had triggered these nightmares. Two of these women struggled with memories of a suppressive father. The third, by contrast, seems to have always been able to hold her ground and was strongly resisted by her mother only after the mother died. All these women have been given pseudonyms, and each story is analysed in the form in which it was written in 2014.

Ambiguous Memory: Hanna (K228–237)

Hanna is a 57-year-old woman whose father died of cancer almost 30 years earlier. Her father was an important person in her life. She begins her narrative by describing a pleasant and beautiful dream in which her father appears as he used to be when he was alive and healthy, always telling funny stories. But she soon admits that this dream was exceptional. She was more accustomed to dreaming of her father as a living corpse suffering from uncontrollable cancer pain. In addition to being distressing, these dreams were often followed by bad things in real life, such as the deaths of family members. Hanna found these dreams ominous and threatening.

It would be possible to interpret Hanna's bad dreams as expressions of traumatic memories of her father's suffering and death or as manifestations of unresolved grief. She writes that she was unable to face her father's approaching death and discuss his departure while he was still alive. However, her life story reveals two more reasons for the nightmares. First, her relationship with her father is difficult and ambiguous. While calling him "My Father Sunshine",² Hanna also expresses bitterness towards him because he used to govern her life without ever listening to her wishes. For example, she writes that she was traumatised by music competitions in which her father compelled her to participate. She blames her parents for not encouraging her to have a will of her own. Despite the painful aspects of these memories, Hanna is determined to cherish her father's legacy. She has painted a portrait of him and passed on his memory to her children by telling them his stories.

Second, nightmares typically emerge during stressful life situations (e.g. Sandman, 2017). Hanna was going through a difficult period in her life. She writes:

I have to admit, however, that my life was like hell on earth – I dreamt about him, and unpleasant things often happened at the same time. It increased my anxiety, and I started to fear those dreams terribly. It was really hard

² In Finland, the name Father Sunshine (Isä Aurinkoinen) ironically refers to Joseph Stalin. Hanna, however, seems to use the name without irony, as a term of endearment. She sharply contrasts this characterisation with her father's flaws of character as a parent. Also, she uses the possessive suffix -ni (Isäni Aurinkoinen), which makes the expression slightly different from the commonly used nickname for Stalin.

to have a nightmare about my father, and soon afterwards my own life felt like something from a horror movie. (Hanna, 2014)

The dreams that she interpreted as ominous became a serious burden, and Hanna sought help from the church and prayed that they would stop. Being a Christian, she was also worried about her father's soul and found comfort in praying for him. Members of her congregation emphasised that other forms of contact with the spiritual world should be avoided, but Hanna does not really share their view. She hovers between Christian interpretations and her relational bond with her father.

Writing the narrative in 2014, Hanna states that her life has now gradually become normal and that her latest dreams of her father have been pleasant. The dreams turned positive five years earlier, but she still expected them to be foreboding. Less than a month after the first positive dream about her father, she was diagnosed with breast cancer. However, she inferred that her illness would not be as fatal as her father's because the dream had been so beautiful. Despite her doubts, Hanna prefers to interpret the dreams as her father's deliberate activity:

Nevertheless, my mind began to develop the thought that my father might have come into my dreams of his own initiative. It is not possible to provide proof either for or against this idea. I also wondered whether he might have wanted to be my guardian angel and therefore always appeared in my dreams? The fact that he was an important person in my life for 28 years may also explain why I still dream about him. (Hanna, 2014)

Hanna uses the past conditional when discussing her father's role as a guardian angel. This shows that she finds these interpretations neither appropriate nor realistic. Nevertheless, she returns to them and – despite the past conditional – also presents arguments that appear to support such interpretations:

I would like to believe that the deceased can really appear in our dreams at will. And I would like to believe that, if my father had been allowed to decide, he would be my guardian angel. I could have been buried many times already, so it is a sheer miracle that I am still alive. What if my guardian angel is my own dad? It has been such a strong safeguard – it is a miracle that I am still among the living! (Hanna, 2014)

In her bereavement narrative, Hanna struggles to establish a positive memory and a comfortable relationship with her father. She seeks a scenario in which her father might compensate for having treated her badly as a child. In Hanna's latest dream, her father asked if she had missed him. Since no misfortune followed the dream, Hanna thinks that her father appeared on purpose to find out if she had forgiven him. He did not explicitly apologise in the dream, but his recognition that he did do something wrong would represent an important step toward the desired outcome.

Hanna's interpretation of her dreams draws on spiritual ideas about the soul's development after death. Such ideas have emerged in modern conceptions of heaven and within the spiritualist movement (McDannell, Lang, 1988). Even without an explicit spiritual framework, people who report encounters with the dead sometimes say the deceased have changed their mind or developed new ideas in the afterlife (Siltala, 2019: 182–183). Despite her religious outlook, Hanna's approach is not based on spiritual belief per se. In her case, the afterlife is a necessary condition because only a post-mortem development of her father will enable the formation of an unambiguously pleasant relationship, in which her beloved father will no longer ignore her feelings and her well-being.

Power Struggle: Kaija (K297–311)

Unlike Hanna, who only focused on her father's memory, Kaija, a woman in her sixties, writes a comprehensive essay that describes the deaths of many of her loved ones and includes both general information and personal thoughts on commemoration and social reactions to bereavement. Her account thus provides a valuable ethnographic description of contemporary death culture. In Kaija's text, distressing dreams occur in connection with her late mother, whose story is interwoven throughout the rich tapestry of her memories. As the protagonist of the text, Kaija presents herself as an active woman who knows what she wants, acts accordingly, and does not hesitate to express disapproval when other peoples' behaviour displeases her. She describes herself as a daddy's girl – so close to her father that her mother was sometimes jealous – but also depicts a close, though occasionally contentious, relationship with her mother. She provides a detailed context in which her bad dreams – though hardly described – can be understood as reflecting a power struggle between herself and her deceased mother.

In the narrative describing her relationship with her mother, it is Kaija who often decides for both of them and holds her ground. For example, she is dissatisfied with her mother's plans and behaviour after her father's death and steps in to put things right:

Mum hardly ever talked about Dad. She just kept repeating how magnificently she had cared for him: It was me who cared for him, it was me who was tired, me and me and me. She never asked herself what was wrong with Dad and never took interest in the medical matters. After Dad's death, Mum was very eager to dispose of Dad's things. Daddy had left an enormous garage full of all kinds of things, some quite valuable, which Mum started giving away for free. I hurried there to claim my share.

Mum never considered what Dad would have wanted or what could be kept. She wanted to divide the inheritance, sell the property and move to a flat [in town]. Thus, she wanted to flee from the past, deny the decades that had passed, and begin an entirely new life. I absolutely refused. The estate would remain intact until Mum's own death, and nothing would be sold or destroyed. It was important to my mother to sell, or almost give away, the last car belonging to Dad and me because she had no driver's licence.

As my mother was kind and soft, she backed down and agreed to live in [the estate]. (Kaija, 2014)

Kaija describes rifts in their relationship, followed by normal communion again. After her mother's death, she remembers not shedding a single tear, feeling only hatred. She gave away her mother's loom and plants and restored the house to the style it had had in the 1960s, when her father was alive. In anger, she finally succeeded in planting roses on her father's grave – a plan her mother had always managed to stop by hastening to plant her traditional begonias first. *"You got it! From now on, there will only be roses"* (Kaija, 2014).

In addition to substantial changes in the house, Kaija also made it clear in the neighbourhood that old agreements allowing trespassing had only been made with her mother and would cease to apply. All this finally provoked opposition:

I don't remember ever having dreams about my father. But with my mother, I fought in dreams almost every night for at least a year. We had furious disputes over who was in command, especially in [the estate]. There was a lot of fire and brimstone in these nightmares. (Kaija, 2014)

During the daytime, Kaija made changes that transferred control of the estate from her mother to herself, gradually dismantling her mother's order in the house. At night, she confronted her in her dreams. An old-fashioned, morally charged scholarly interpretation would have suggested that Kaija had nightmares because she felt guilty about abolishing her mother's personal legacy. Guilt was a central explanation for nightmares when early psychological ideas entered public discourse on dreaming in the 19th century. This perspective interpreted the haunting presence of dissatisfied deceased individuals as a reflection of the experiencer's guilty feelings. In addition, it echoed a long-standing tradition of viewing nightmares as a result of immoral and unhealthy lifestyles. The notion that nightmares were caused by a guilty conscience was widely disseminated, appearing in both adult and children's literature in 19th and 20th century Finland (see Koski et al., 2024: 79–81, 293–295).

However, Kaija's narrative does not support a moralising interpretation of a guilty conscience. Kaija shows no remorse and seems to feel she is doing the right thing by restoring her father's legacy, which her mother had undermined. Rather than guilt, Kaija explicitly mentions feeling hatred after her mother's death, and her anger and annoyance are reflected in her harsh critique of her. If nightmares are a means of processing difficult emotions, it is this hatred that should be consumed in the dreams.

By the time of writing, the hatred has dissipated, the nightmares are gone, and Kaija is satisfied with the changes she has made in the house and the estate. She also thinks that her mother's legacy is adequately preserved: *"Mum could enter through the door any time. She would probably comment on how clean everything is"* (Kaija, 2014).

As the conclusion of the bereavement narrative, a stable relationship between the living daughter and the deceased mother has been established. In Kaija's imagination, her mother's comment would be positive and approving. The power struggle has ended, Kaija has assumed control and her mother has acquiesced to the changes she has made.

Breaking Free: Tuula (K246–250)

Tuula writes about her father's sudden death from a heart attack in the 1990s. She lived and worked on a farm together with her parents until their lives were abruptly changed. Tuula describes the feelings her father's death evoked, her and her mother's struggle to cope with the hard work on the farm, and, in particular, her battle with the distressing memories of her father. In her narrative, Tuula skilfully captures the oppressive atmosphere that pervaded the household while her father was alive.

Memories circle in my head. In my mind's eye, I can still see how a medium-height but rather stout man enters the room and fills the space. His presence feels overwhelming and makes other people kind of shrink. The feeling that I have managed to do something wrong again surges into my mind. (Tuula, 2014)

Tuula is aware that the feelings she describes are not those generally expected of the bereaved: she was not missing her father but someone to drive the tractor.

I guess you might find it inappropriate to read that the bereaved are grieving over unfinished work and money when the body is not even cold yet. But money and work were something we understood, whereas the father who had died was something incomprehensible – something that could not be grasped in an instant. (Tuula, 2014)

Even though Tuula writes that everyday life ran more smoothly without her father being there and constantly admonishing the women, they were left with an unrealistically large workload, which caused considerable stress. Not being able to cope with the tasks made Tuula suspect that her father had been right all along when he declared she was a mistake and good for nothing. Tuula was not free from his oppressive behaviour even after his death. First of all, the ways her father used to define her still had an impact on her self-esteem. Second, he began appearing in her dreams and scolding her. However, she finally found the courage to confront him:

Yes, father did try to take care of the farm even after his death. He appeared in my dreams and reproached me for one task or another left undone. Finally, I got tired of being scolded every night, and half asleep, I summoned from my memory the image of my father's coffin in the grave and of myself throwing earth onto it. I said to the old man frowning at my bedside: you are dead and buried, stay in your grave. I remember throwing earth with a shovel onto your coffin. So get lost, ghost. I may even have made a sign of the cross on it. After that, there has been peace. (Tuula, 2014)

Tuula's final response to the ghost takes the form of a direct confrontation. She justifies – perhaps as much to herself as to her late father – that he is dead, properly buried

according to custom, and no longer has any place among the living. The sign of the cross does not belong to the Lutheran repertoire of lived religion, but is performed by the minister in the funeral ceremony. Tuula's wording suggests it was something extra, employed as a Christian symbol for warding off the ghost. In Tuula's narrative, the aggressive outburst by the bedside marks the end of her relationship with her father. The episode is followed by a short paragraph: "*Ten years ago, I got married and moved into a home of my own, where nothing reminds me of my father. I even got a job*" (Tuula, 2014).

This passage indicates that her life took a turn for the better once she was able to leave her father behind. It also rebuts her father's claims: she was worthy, despite what he used to say.

Unlike Hanna and Kaija, who both had ambivalent relationships with their parents, Tuula had nothing positive to say about her father. Her decision was to break free and dismiss him entirely. The sociologist Annika Jonsson's research on post-mortem social death finds reasons why some people are not remembered after their death. The usual reasons are estrangement or the absence of close friends and relatives (Jonsson, 2015). People such as Tuula's father represent a different category: those whose closest kin are better off forgetting.

PORTRAYAL OF THE PARENT IN BEREAVEMENT NARRATIVES

To justify my interpretation of the role of nightmares, I analysed how the parent is represented in each of the three bereavement narratives. In a closer analysis, these three texts differ from the other fourteen bereavement narratives in the DLM collection in that they portray the parent in a more negative light. In bereavement narratives, the image of the deceased emerges not only through explicit characterisations of the deceased person, but also through depictions of everyday activities or discussions with them, and reflections on the relationship and loss. Overall, Hanna's narrative includes 18 textual units describing her parent and their interaction, Kaija's 25, and Tuula's 15.

On the basis of their content, I grouped the units into five categories: 1) Negative remarks, 2) Positive remarks, 3) Care and guidance, 4) Life history and reflection, and 5) Processing the memory. *Negative remarks* depicts the deceased in negative terms or portray interaction with them as difficult. For example, Tuula's recollection of her father's messy table manners, Hanna's complaint that her father never listened to her, and Kaija's repeated disagreements with her mother cast the parent or the relationship in an undesirable light. *Positive remarks* includes descriptions of togetherness, everyday cooperation, and warm memories. For example, Hanna reminisces about laughing together with her father, and Kaija writes about their good mother-daughter cooperation in planning her father's funeral. *Care and guidance* refers to taking care of an ill or dying parent. Kaija writes extensively about organising her mother's care during her long illness, while Tuula, whose father died suddenly, could only find him collapsed on the floor, place him in the recovery position and call an ambulance. Hanna mentions praying for her father's soul and caring for him after his death. The category *Life history and reflection*

includes information about the parent’s life, their interests, family relations and personal qualities, often accompanied by thoughts about how the past has affected the present. For example, Kaija shares parts of her mother’s family history, whereas Tuula writes about her father’s special interest in war and military discipline, contrasting it with his own behaviour. *Processing the memory* includes descriptions of the narrators’ actions and thoughts in relation to their parents’ legacy, such as cherishing or rejecting the memory. For example, Hanna describes actively passing on her father’s stories, while at the same time dwelling on the ambiguity of his memory. This category also encompasses the nightmares and their interpretations.

The following table shows the number of these units in each woman’s story. Hanna’s story differs from the others in that it assumes her father’s conscious existence in the afterlife. By attributing post-mortem agency to him, she processes the relationship not merely as a memory but as an ongoing bond. The numbers in brackets refer to actions or thoughts concerning her father’s well-being and development in the afterlife.

	Hanna (18 units)	Kaija (25 units)	Tuula (15 units)
Negative remarks	3	7	5
Positive remarks	2	4	-
Care and guidance	1 (+2)	4	1
Life history and reflection	1	4	4
Processing the memory	6 (+3)	6	5

Table 2: Analysis of the bereavement narratives’ textual units, in which Hanna, Kaija, and Tuula characterise the person of their deceased parent and the relationship before and after the parent’s death (Provided by the author)

All three women have written more negative than positive or neutral remarks about their experiences with the parent. Tuula’s narrative contains no positive descriptions of interaction with her father. In this respect, these accounts differ markedly from the other bereavement narratives in the DLM collection, which contain exclusively positive remarks about the deceased. This does not mean that the DLM collection lacks critical remarks or mixed feelings about the deceased. However, participants who produced full bereavement narratives have generally chosen to describe a loved-one whom they portray with love, respect and gratitude.

NARRATING THE SELF IN RELATION TO THE DECEASED

Bereavement narratives not only reassess the role of the deceased; they are also building blocks of the narrator’s own life story. Contemporary narrative research views the self as fragmented and situational. Personal narratives shape the past and create causality and coherence between the self that acted in the past, the self that acts, feels and evaluates the events in the present, and potential future selves. Culturally prevalent underlying

models – implicit narratives – guide the ways in which experiences are remembered and narrated. However, narrators can apply their own narrative agency and choose how to position themselves in relation to cultural expectations, either conforming to them or resisting them. They can also position themselves and other actors in their narrative in ways they find meaningful. Thus, narrative has the power to create new potential selves and to change social structures (Ochs, Capps, 1996: 20–23, 29, 36–37; Bamberg, 2006: 144–145; Koskinen-Koivisto, 2016: 49–52; Meretoja, 2022: 292–300).

In their bereavement narratives, each of these authors resists the role previously assigned to her within the daughter-parent relationship. The distressing dreams highlight their discomfort with their parent's memory, and as the story unfolds, the relationship changes. Hanna is dissatisfied with her position as a neglected child who was never taught to stand her ground. Her nightmares did not occur immediately after the loss but emerged later, during a period marked by other stressors. Yet it was her father who appeared in these nightmares, and she links them to his personality. She weaves both the distressing dreams and the subsequent pleasant ones into a narrative of potential positive development, portraying them as her father's attempt to protect her from the hereafter – possibly as a guardian angel. By suggesting a change in her father's behaviour and attitude, the narrative improves Hanna's own role, ultimately portraying her as a daughter who is cared for. Hanna's narrative about her father as a guardian angel diverges from mainstream beliefs and from the views on the afterlife prevalent in her own social circles. She expresses doubts about its validity, but it is the social reality she wishes to be true, and she narrates it in the context of the collection, which permits full narrative agency.

Kaija resists both her mother's and her neighbours' expectations that she could continue her mother's legacy and conform to her choices. In particular, she resists her mother's management of the house after her father's demise. Both her narrative and the concrete actions she describes testify to a reassessment of family relations: by restricting her late mother's personal agency, she recovers her late father's neglected legacy. Kaija justifies this change of power relations by portraying her mother's treatment of her father's memory and belongings as hurtful and unjust. The nightmares reflect the emotional strain and difficulty of this process, but in the end, she finds the outcome pleasing and balanced.

Tuula, in turn, entirely rejects the role assigned to her by her father and explicitly states that her life improved once she freed herself from his influence. Tuula's narrative is more straightforward than those of Hanna or Kaija and gives the impression that it does not weigh various interpretative lines but simply describes Tuula's experiences. It recounts the circumstances of their life and the death of her father, culminating in the confrontation with his ghost and leading to a better life elsewhere. Tuula portrays herself as a woman who escaped oppressive family dynamics and managed to build a new life and strengthened sense of self-esteem. As a consequence of her past experiences, she appreciates her pet dogs more than some of her human relatives.

CONCLUSION: NIGHTMARES AND CONTINUING BONDS

In this paper, I have analysed bereavement narratives that describe problematic relationships with a deceased parent and nightmares occurring in the course of processing the memory. From the perspective of psychological dream studies, nightmares are typically understood as responses to distressing experiences in waking life. In the context of bereavement, they usually occur soon after the loss and within the early phases of grief, when the bereaved are still struggling to come to terms with the loss. Within psychological approaches to bereavement, external forms of communication with the deceased – that is experiences interpreted as encounters with them – are generally regarded as part of the grieving process and likewise refer to a struggle to understand the reality of death. While it is commonly assumed that the loss itself is the primary source of emotional turmoil and distress, grief is highly individual. In some cases, it is the nature of the relationship that continues to cause anxiety even after death.

Within the framework of extended narratives, it has been possible to analyse the context of bereavement dreams and other factors beyond the loss itself that may have contributed to the experiences. In these three bereavement narratives, the temporal patterns of nightmares differ considerably: they began several years after the loss in Hanna's case; occurred repeatedly during the first year after the loss in Kaija's; or took place occasionally, probably during the first months or so in Tuula's account (although she does not specify the exact timeframe). Instead of dealing with the loss, they seem to be connected to other critical issues. In Hanna's case, the nightmares of her father coincided with health problems, the deaths of female relatives, and other unspecified crises. Yet, she interprets them as rooted in her unsatisfactory relationship with her father. In Kaija's case, the nightmares are not connected with the death itself but with the dismantling of her mother's order in the house and decreasing her mother's status in the family. In Tuula's case, the most acute stress was caused by the workload on the farm and her feelings of having failed instilled by her father during his lifetime. Therefore, it seems that it was not the loss as such but her father's personality and their living conditions that caused the nightmares. For these women, the question was not how to cope without the deceased parent – as is usually the case in bereavement narratives – but how to cope with the impact the deceased had exerted on their lives. Instead of perpetuating the deceased in their bereavement narratives, their goal was to change or dismiss them.

These three narratives can be viewed as examples of continuing bonds, as they depict after-death communication between the daughter and the late parent. None of these women wanted to simply continue the relationship, but there was an effort to change it. Hanna wanted to continue the bond, but only after transforming her father into a more responsive and compassionate parent. Kaija wanted to actively diminish her mother's legacy and dismiss some parts of her life. While she clearly retained an internalised image of her mother, it needed to serve Kaija's own interests, not her mother's. Tuula experienced undesired continuity due to her father's presence, but it gave her the opportunity for explicit rejection.

STATEMENT ON RESEARCH DATA MANAGEMENT

The author states that the article is based on archival sources, which are cited in the list of references below.

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POKOJNI STARŠ V MOREČIH SANJAH: SOOČANJE S TEŽAVAMI V PRIPOVEDIH O ŽALOVANJU

Po izgubi družinskega člana žalujoči pogosto na novo ovrednotijo svoj odnos do pokojnika. Sanjanje o umrlem in pripovedovanje o njegovem življenju sta običajna načina predelovanja izgube ter oblikovanja spomina nanj. Vendar pa niso vsi spomini in sanje pozitivni. Prispevek analizira tri pripovedi o žalovanju, v katerih odrasle hčere opisujejo morečo komunikacijo s pokojnim staršem po njegovi smrti. Pripovedi izvirajo iz arhivske zbirke *Death, Loss and Memory* (Smrt, izguba in spomin), ki je bila leta 2014 deponirana v arhivu Finskega literarnega društva.

Besedila so obravnavana kot osebne pripovedi v okviru interdisciplinarnih raziskav sanj v času žalovanja ter koncepta trajajočih vezi (*continuing bonds*). V psihologiji nočne more veljajo za odziv na čustvene stiske. Kadar se pojavljajo v kontekstu žalovanja, jih navadno razumemo kot znamenje težav pri sprejemanju smrti. Prispevek se od psiholoških pristopov razlikuje po tem, da nočnih mor ne obravnava v okviru procesa žalovanja. Namesto tega so izkušnje analizirane v kontekstu pripovedi o žalovanju, ki ne opisujejo zgolj smrti, temveč tudi življenje pokojnika in njegov odnos s pripovedovalko.

V primerjavi z drugimi pripovedmi o žalovanju iz iste zbirke, ki ne vključujejo nočnih mor, te tri zgodbe prikazujejo pokojnika v izrazito negativni luči. Osrednji problem teh besedil ni vprašanje, kako živeti brez izgubljenega starša, temveč kako se soočiti z njegovim trajnim vplivom na življenje pripovedovalke. Nočne more zato ne predelujejo same izgube, temveč čustveno stisko, ki izvira iz problematičnega odnosa med hčerjo in staršem.

Vsaka od treh pripovedi je analizirana kot samostojen primer. Prvi primer predstavlja besedilo hčere, ki meni, da jo je oče v času svojega življenja zane-marjal. Po njegovi smrti si prizadeva izboljšati podobo njegovega starševstva in si ga predstavlja kot svojega angela varuha. Drugi primer prikazuje boj za moč med hčerjo in ostarelo materjo. Po materini smrti hči začne spreminjati družinsko posest z namenom zmanjšati sled materine osebne zapuščine, zaradi česar se z njo nato spopada v sanjah. Tretji primer predstavlja oblastnega očeta in hčer, ki

njegovo neodobranje čuti tudi po njegovi smrti. Nazadnje se sooči z njegovim duhom in se osvobodi njegovega vpliva.

V vseh treh primerih moreče sanje predstavljajo problematično obliko trajajočih vezi ter razkrivajo nelagodje sanjalk ob spominu na starša. Analiza pripovedi izhaja iz koncepta narativne dejavnosti oziroma agensa avtoric. S pripovedovanjem lahko te ženske zavrnejo vloge, ki so jim jih pripisali pokojni starši. Kot performativna dejavnost jim pripovedovanje omogoča spreminjanje družbenih položajev in preoblikovanje odnosov v skladu z lastnimi potrebami. Namen teh pripovedi o žalovanju zato ni ohranjanje pokojnikov v spominu, temveč njihovo preoblikovanje ali celo simbolna zavrnitev.

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“Growth” vs. “Stuckness”: Morality, the Afterlife and the Influence of the Deceased on the Living

Tina Ivnik

This article explores conceptions of the afterlife and experiences of the dead among adherents of alternative spirituality in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Based on ethnographic research in Sarajevo and Banja Luka, the study demonstrates how moral frameworks shape the topography of the afterlife. On the one hand, a predominant belief in reincarnation stimulates positive, comforting encounters with deceased individuals who lived and died in accordance with moral values. On the other hand, the study examines how souls considered “stuck” – due to immoral lives or “bad deaths” – can exert an unpleasant influence on the living. Reciprocity, a central concept in understanding relations between the living and the dead, is thus reconfigured in comparison with traditional expressions. In this alternative spiritual milieu, only the deceased who are perceived as “stuck” require assistance from the living, while the deceased more broadly are understood as those who care for and support the living.

KEYWORDS: alternative spirituality, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the deceased, afterlife, reincarnation, stuck souls, morality

Članek obravnava predstave o posmrtnem življenju in izkušnje z mrtvimi med pripadniki alternativnih duhovnosti v Bosni in Hercegovini. Temelji na etnografski raziskavi v Sarajevu in Banji Luki ter analizira, kako moralni okviri oblikujejo topografijo posmrtnega življenja. Po eni strani prevladujoče verovanje v duhovni napredek in rast v posmrtnem življenju vpliva na pozitivna srečanja s pokojniki, ki so živeli v skladu z moralnimi načeli. Po drugi strani pa članek prikaže, kako duše, ki zaradi nemoralnega življenja ali »slabe smrti« veljajo za »zataknjene«, največkrat negativno vplivajo na žive. Recipročnost, osrednji koncept pri razumevanju odnosov med živimi in mrtvimi, je v primerjavi s prevladujočimi tradicionalnimi razumevanji preoblikovana. Med pripadniki alternativnih duhovnosti pomoč živih potrebujejo le tisti pokojniki, ki so zaznani kot »zataknjeni«, medtem ko so mrtvi širše razumljeni kot skrbniki in podporniki živih.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: alternativne duhovnosti, Bosna in Hercegovina, mrtvi, posmrtno življenje, reinkarnacija, zataknjene duše, moralnost

INTRODUCTION

Alternative spirituality is a phenomenon that has been gaining prominence worldwide for several decades (Heelas, 1996; Hanegraaff, 1996; Hammer, 2003; Heelas, Woodhead, 2005; Heelas, 2009; Palmisano, Pannofino, 2021; Mossière, 2023; Dyndová, 2024). While many researchers have discussed the emergence and characteristics of alternative

spirituality in the West (see Fuller, 2001; Tacey, 2004; Bowman, 2014) and in some post-socialist countries (see Črnič, 2001; Potrata, 2004; Kis-Halas, 2019; Putnik, 2019; Radulović, 2019; Panchenko, 2021; Bužeková, 2025: 131), little attention has been paid to these phenomena within Bosnia and Herzegovina (see Hammer, Swartz, 2020). This country's religious landscape has been shaped by both its socialist past within the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (see Radić, 2002) and by the subsequent reassertion of religious identities linked to the three main ethnicities following the 1992–1995 war¹ (see Kolind, 2007; Maček, 2009). Even though alternative spirituality is still of limited importance there and no demographic data on the matter exists, the growing number of yoga studios, meditation courses and spiritual workshops indicates that alternative spirituality is also on the rise in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The above-mentioned transformation is bringing about changes in individuals' ideas and practices, including the conceptions and customs related to dying, the dead and the afterlife. Notably, it is reconfiguring the notion of reciprocity between the living and the dead, which many scholars regard as a key concept for interpreting their relationship (see Walter, 2019; Hesz, 2025; Mencej, 2025; Pócs, 2025). Traditionally it has been assumed that, after death, the living bear the responsibility of caring for the deceased (see Klass, 2014; Djurić, 2024). In the context examined in this article, however, this obligation applies only to the deceased who are considered "stuck". More commonly, it is the deceased who take care of the living.

Instead of adopting atheist or religious explanations regarding dying, the deceased and life after death, spiritual people are embracing alternative spiritual interpretations. These are often eclectic (see Partridge, 2005: 55; Radulović, 2019; Bužeková, 2024) and vernacular (Primiano, 1995) as individuals are adopting interpretations from diverse traditions to create their own understandings. However varied these explanations may be, this article focuses on identifying similarities in ideas and experiences among my interlocutors. The section dedicated to ideas addresses the first research question: (1.) What are the notions of the afterlife among alternative spiritual adherents in Bosnia and Herzegovina? Furthermore, drawing on the theory of continuing bonds (Klass et al., 1996), which normalised the social relationships individuals maintain with their significant deceased, I examine the agency attributed to the deceased on the living and how this agency is connected to my interlocutors' understandings of the afterlife. This leads to the second research question: (2.) How are individuals' experiences of the agency of the deceased related to their conceptions of the afterlife?

I will answer these questions on the basis of ethnographic data gathered during six months of research in the two largest cities of Bosnia and Herzegovina – Sarajevo and Banja Luka. In this time, I conducted 105 semi-structured interviews² with individuals

¹ After the war, in the course of the ethnicisation of religious differences, Serbs came to be broadly identified as Orthodox Christians, Bosniaks as Muslims, and Croats as Catholics.

² The majority of my interlocutors were women (seventy-four), although I made an effort to include men as well (twenty-four). Other researchers also noted that women tend to be more actively engaged in alternative spiritual milieus (see Heelas, Woodhead, 2005: 97–106; Bužeková, 2014). The ages of my interlocutors ranged from twenty-six to seventy-eight, with most falling between thirty and fifty years of age.

engaged in various forms of alternative spirituality and undertook participant observation in spiritual workshops. My interlocutors followed diverse spiritual paths. Some were affiliated with relatively informal groups, while others were connected with more organised movements, such as a neo-shamanic circle, the Brahma Kumaris, the Spiritual Science Research Foundation, the Bruno Gröning Circle, or communities linked to spiritual teachers such as Sai Baba³ and Mohanji.⁴ Others practiced various spiritual techniques such as reiki or theta healing, and I met some at workshops on family constellations. That said, most of my interlocutors engaged in spirituality independently: they attended different workshops and events organised by diverse groups and movements, read spiritual literature, and consumed online content on spiritual topics. Although some people declined the invitation to be interviewed, many participants were eager to speak about their experiences with the deceased, a topic they felt was underexplored yet highly important for them. As Kaarina Koski (2016: 16) notes, such experiences are often welcomed in New Age circles. Even though various authors argue that, in the contemporary West, the deceased are not generally perceived as part of society (see Klass, 2014: 104), my research – supported by other scholars working on similar topics (see Lee, 2013; Koski, 2016; Bužeková, 2025) – demonstrates that within alternative spiritual circles the deceased are understood as remaining part of society, integrated into everyday life, and playing an active role in individuals' lives.

In this article I focus on people who identify as “spiritual but not religious” (for discussion of the term, see Fuller, 2001; Wixwat, Saucier, 2021). I refer to my interlocutors as “spiritual people” and use the term “alternative spirituality” to describe their milieu. As most of my interlocutors reject established religious institutions, I use the term “alternative” referring to its distinction from established religions. In understanding spirituality, I follow scholars (see Heelas, 1996: 18–22; Sutcliffe, Bowman, 2000: 8; Fuller, 2001: 4; Houtman, Aupers, 2010: 6; Wixwat, Saucier, 2021: 122; Bužeková, 2024: 1–3) who distinguish spirituality from religion, as it is centred on individual, subjective experiences and the quest for personal authenticity, whereas religion is typically associated with institutional structures and codified systems of belief.⁵ I acknowledge that the term “alternative spirituality” is problematic due to its breadth, as it encompasses a wide array of diverse and heterogeneous groups with very different perspectives and beliefs (Sutcliffe, Bowman, 2000: 10–11). To avoid this ambiguity, I provide a detailed presentation of each interlocutor, including the groups and ideas that have significantly shaped their views.

³ Sai Baba was an Indian guru who passed away in 2011 but continues to have numerous devotees worldwide.

⁴ Mohanji is an Indian spiritual teacher who leads a transnational spiritual movement through his Mohanji Foundation.

⁵ While spirituality may sometimes oppose religion, this is not always the case. For instance, the Sufi tradition in Bosnia and Herzegovina is a spiritual practice that is part of Islam (cf. Kostadinova, 2023).

THE SPIRITUAL MILIEU AND THE AFTERLIFE

Alternative spirituality crucially influenced the ideas my interlocutors had about metaphysical topics. In particular, it informed their responses to abstract questions concerning life after death. All research participants who described themselves as spiritual stated that they believed in reincarnation, a belief widespread in alternative spiritual circles, although understood differently from Hindu and Buddhist formulations (Walter, 1993: 132–141; Lee, 2015: 86). As Tony Walter (1993: 141) observes, it was precisely through the popularisation of reincarnation that notions of the afterlife gained renewed relevance within alternative spiritual movements. This holds true for my interlocutors, many of whom articulated relatively elaborate views on the afterlife.

The people I spoke with often described the stark contrast between their elaborate adult afterlife beliefs and the relative nonimportance of such questions during their childhood. For the majority, their upbringing – in the socialist republic of Yugoslavia – was non-religious, and the question of life after death was rarely discussed. Asja,⁶ an interlocutor who practices different spiritualities – meditation, reiki, yoga and neo-shamanism being the most important for her – told me about the transformation of her afterlife beliefs. In response to my question about what her views had been while growing up, she said:

Socialist-communist, you know – that's it! You live, you die, and there's nothing! That's the idea I had, right? /.../ And now I know we repeat existences, that we come back, but basically, right, we return only insofar as we've left those deposits [negative patterns one still needs to solve⁷], and so on. (Asja, F, 1968)

Lacking an explanation about life after death, she gradually found convincing answers through years of involvement in various alternative spiritual practices. Other interlocutors similarly told me that alternative spirituality filled the “vacuum” left by their atheist upbringing. Many of them actively searched for explanations to metaphysical issues through different approaches – including traditional religions – but told me alternative spirituality was the most convincing for them. Given that alternative spirituality encompasses a heterogeneous array of ideas, practices, groups and movements (Sutcliffe, Bowman, 2000), individuals combined elements from these diverse sources to construct their own narratives about life after death. My next interlocutor, who otherwise identifies as a follower of Mohanji, told me how her spiritual path and the various ideas she encountered shaped her current beliefs about the afterlife:

Gradually, you know, I started working on myself. First, it was homeopathy, then kinesiology appeared. And through kinesiology, I realised

⁶ To protect the identities of my interlocutors, I gave them pseudonyms and, where necessary, modified their personal details.

⁷ The text in the square brackets was written by the author.

the existence of the concept of karma and transference. I mean, I always believed in karma, but I didn't fully grasp what it truly represented or how much ancestral burden we carry, you know? /.../ And then, of course, people who were into spirituality started appearing in my life. And then, in those circles, I learned about various techniques and such. Then Reiki came along, transcendental meditation, and I even went to Peru and tried ayahuasca. (Lamija, F, 1976)

Interlocutors often told me that they intuitively felt reincarnation was the most convincing or most logical explanation for the afterlife, and they sometimes supported this view with “scientific” arguments. Amina, a follower of Mohanji, who regularly participates in family constellations and practices different types of energy healing, told me why she was convinced in reincarnation:

I am /.../, an engineer at heart and by profession, and I always find myself pondering the origin of information. It's not about taking things at face value, but when you arrive at the same information from many different sources, that says something. Many things have already been proven today. /.../. It [reincarnation] has actually been demonstrated through regression therapy. Many studies have been done on this topic – life after death, the soul's transition – many regression therapists have written about it. It's hard to believe none of it is true. /.../ Why do some children fear certain things from birth? Why do they love some things and dislike others? /.../ Every life is a continuation of the previous one. (Amina, F, 1978)

Amina maintains that reincarnation should not be understood merely as a belief, but as a truth-based concept substantiated by the evidence she cites. This kind of argumentation is common among alternative spiritual people, who frequently use scientific language and quasi-scientific explanations to legitimise alternative spiritual ideas (see Hanegraaff, 1996: 62–66; Hammer, Swartz, 2020: 101–107; Bužeková, 2023: 25, 31). Olav Hammer emphasises precisely this rhetoric of science in relation to afterlife beliefs within alternative spirituality. He argues that spiritual practitioners who claim that reincarnation forms part of a rational worldview draw upon Enlightenment rationality. According to Hammer (2003: 489–494), this represents a distinct product of the modern age, made possible by the progress of secularisation: what used to be a religious question has now been incorporated into a rationalistic worldview. He further claims that it is precisely in past-life experiences that the rationality of reincarnation beliefs is grounded. If such experiences are available, as my interlocutor Amina also stated, one does not need blind faith to believe in them.

Although scholars have noted the fragmentation of afterlife beliefs in contemporary times (Singleton, 2012; Lee, 2013: 110–111), certain unifying beliefs can still be found, even within eclectic forms of alternative spirituality. The first of these that I examine concerns an alternative spiritual understanding of reincarnation. According to this

understanding, life after death is conceived as a continuous journey, whose ultimate goal is the spiritual progress of the soul (see also Hanegraaff, 1996: 264–268; Hammer, 2003: 464). The afterlife is thus imagined as a positive, spiritual place that enables the continuous growth of individuals. This was mirrored in the experiences my interlocutors had with the deceased. These experiences were predominantly positive, with the deceased appearing to comfort them, to let them know they would be fine in the afterlife, and that they are still here with them. Although the afterlife was largely perceived in positive terms, certain souls – who, for moral reasons, could not attain the proper place – were regarded as remaining “stuck”. These souls were often portrayed as troubling the living, thereby exercising a more disruptive agency over them. In the next chapter, I will elaborate on this distinction.

WHEN THE AFTERLIFE CONSTITUTES GROWTH AND TRAVEL

Raymond L. M. Lee (2015: 92) observes a transformation within New Age spirituality, where the afterlife is no longer conceptualised as a final destination – such as heaven or hell – but rather as part of an ongoing spiritual journey. In this perspective, death is seen as a transitional phase in an ongoing spiritual development, and not as an endpoint (see also Walter, 1993: 131; Houtman, Aupers, 2010: 7; Lee, 2013: 114–121; Kinsella, 2017: 187). Among my interlocutors, the idea of continuous growth – both in the afterlife and in subsequent lives – appeared repeatedly. Many people told me about their previous lives, how these are influencing their current life and the negative patterns they need to solve in this life to progress spiritually.

Connected to the notion of spiritual progression across lifetimes, ideas about pre-incarnation agreements⁸ were fairly widespread. My interlocutor, a follower of Mohanji, adopts an eclectic approach, combining ideas of pre-incarnation agreements she read about in literature containing Mohanji’s teachings. She describes reincarnation as a continuous process oriented towards personal growth, stimulated by the challenges one encounters in life and chosen by the individual themselves:

You come back, yes, you create a new body. This means you return according to an agreement or contract, which you yourself create. You decide. You come back by your own desire, in the sense that what remains – when you say “karma” – are essentially unfulfilled desires. You want to learn compassion. Maybe in your past life you were a total jerk, and now, when you’re back in a state of universal consciousness, you say: “I want to return. I want to

⁸ Pre-incarnation agreements are described as arrangements made between lifetimes by souls, often in consultation with spiritual guides. Through these agreements, souls actively choose the circumstances, challenges and lessons they will face in their next incarnation. These are meant to help souls learn new lessons and thus to continue developing spiritually. My interlocutors specifically referred to two books that influenced their ideas on preincarnation agreements: Robert Schwartz’s (2016) *Your Soul’s Plan*, and Michael Newton’s (2005) *Journey of Souls: Case Studies of Life Between Lives*.

learn how to love. I want to learn empathy.” And then you negotiate within the soul group – what’s it called? There’s a book, Your Soul’s Plan /.../, it explains in great detail how this agreement is made. So, all of us – our closest family, sons, daughters, uncles, aunts – we’re all in the same soul group. We constantly reincarnate together and make agreements: “Okay, Tina wants to learn empathy. She wants to experience this, this, and this. So, let’s decide who goes with her – who’ll be the daughter, who’ll be the son, who’ll be the partner she’ll hate, the one who’ll do, I don’t know, this and that.” (Ena, F, 1978)

Many of my interlocutors told me that their involvement in alternative spirituality changed the way they perceive death and dying. Like Ena, many others understood death as a transition – a process with spiritual potential or an opportunity for growth. Olav Hammer (2003: 469) writes that the idea of the soul’s reincarnation as a means of spiritual progression is derived from the Theosophical theory of reincarnation developed in the 19th century. Although ideas of reincarnation have been present in Europe since then, they remained a relatively marginal belief, limited to esotericism, until they gradually began to enter mainstream culture in the second half of the 20th century (Hammer, 2003: 480). However, understandings of reincarnation in Europe have remained largely based on the Theosophical interpretations.

In the process of becoming a mainstream afterlife belief in the West, ideas about reincarnation were also shaped by other influences. Jan Bremmer notes the impact of narratives of near-death experiences (NDEs) on contemporary understandings and the growing fascination with the afterlife. He points out that these narratives were popularised by Raymond Moody’s bestselling book *Life After Life: The Investigation of a Phenomenon – Survival of Bodily Death* (1984). In this work, Moody describes NDE accounts involving feelings of universal love and reunion with loved ones during their journey to the afterlife. Bremmer (2002: 101–102) analyses modern NDE narratives and suggests that the contemporary afterlife is imagined as a realm filled with love and protection – which makes it an antithesis to the modern world. He states that the afterlife has thus become a means for psychological improvement rather than a final destination, reflecting the modern worldview in which individual progress constitutes the central goal of life.

Accounts of NDEs were repeatedly mentioned by my interlocutors as important for their understanding of the afterlife. Their visions of the afterlife often corresponded to notions of the afterlife described by Jan Bremmer – feelings of universal love, protection, the possibility of growth, and reunion with deceased loved ones. The afterlife was predominantly understood as the soul’s true home – a spiritual realm filled with positive moral qualities such as compassion, tolerance, kindness, patience and unconditional love. Rather than being a place of judgment or punishment, it was seen as a nurturing space that supports the soul’s continued evolution and gives meaning to life.

As a result of these specific understandings of the afterlife, many interlocutors expressed not fearing death. This outlook aligns with observations made by other scholars. Raymond L. M. Lee (2013: 114–121) points out that in alternative spiritualities, death is

not perceived as frightening but as a spiritual transition – a gateway to self-knowledge, as the individual is freed from the material plane, that is, the body. My interlocutor, the Mohanji follower cited above, tells me about her optimistic vision of the afterlife:

I truly believe in reincarnation – this whole concept makes complete sense to me. /.../ And it was the first time I heard that death isn't the end of everything [in the spiritual workshop she attended]. In fact, I experienced it, somehow it is my emotion – that death is a great liberation. That life on Earth is actually suffering because you're shackled to this physical body with its limited capabilities, while we're really from some third, fifth, twelfth dimension. And here we are, compressed into this body with its organs, perceptions, and actions – it can only do so much. It can't astrally project into other dimensions, even though all of that is actually our true reality. This whole narrative totally makes sense to me; I get it. So I've stopped fearing death. /.../ This idea that it's not the end really resonates with me. (Ena, F, 1978)

Similar perceptions of the afterlife were reflected in the agency of the dead as experienced by my interlocutors. Many interlocutors told me their deceased appeared to them in difficult moments, sometimes connected with the bereavement, but not necessarily. Encounters with the deceased and feelings of their impact were often described as positive experiences, providing peace of mind, serving as proof that life after death exists, and confirming the positive view of the afterlife held by my interlocutors.

Amna experienced contact with her deceased mother in the form of wind, which provided comfort during her bereavement, and continued to sustain connection with her mother later in life. She was brought up in a non-religious family, although her grandparents were practising Muslims. Consequently, she was not socialised within a religious framework, but still had some contact with it. She describes her mother as relatively spiritual: she read available spiritual literature and believed in metaphysical phenomena. Amna said she began to develop her own spirituality under her mother's influence, embracing beliefs in the universe, energy and reincarnation. After her mother's death, she first perceived her presence in the form of wind at her funeral, and such experiences continue to occur in everyday situations. These encounters were always positive experiences for Amna, providing guidance and a sense of connection:

When I have some dilemma, a decision to make, you know, whether to decide in favour of something or not, whether it's the right decision or not, then that wind appears. /.../ It's positive for me, you understand? /.../ I don't approach it [the contact with the dead] with fear, like a warning or anything, it's just that these signs tell me whether I'm on the right path, whether it's like – as if she [her mother] approves. (Amna, F, 1978)

I asked her for a concrete example of the influence her deceased mother had on her:

For example, after more than twenty years /.../ I changed my career, right. /.../ With that, I closed a certain chapter, and these are major life decisions, right. Where essentially, you have to make them on your own – you can talk to people, to friends and so on, but in the end, these are decisions you make by yourself, and you’re not sure if it’s really the right one, you know. And then something like – I sit down and think – “Oh, if only you were here now [her mother],” you know, “I’d ask you what you think about it,” and so on. And then all of a sudden, this little breeze appears out of nowhere. And I think to myself: “That’s it! Aha, okay, maybe you’re giving your approval,” you know? And that somehow gives me a sense of calm, and based on that I make my decision. (Amna, F, 1978)

She goes on to describe the close relationship she had with her mother: they talked frequently, understood each other well, and her mother was always there for all the family. Amna adds that during her mother’s illness, she did everything she could for her, which eased her conscience. Moreover, her mother was aware that she was dying and was prepared for death. Because she died in this way, had lived a morally upright life, and received her daughter’s full support, she was imagined as having successfully passed to the otherworld, to be in a favourable state in the afterlife, and could therefore have a positive impact on the living.

Very often, the deceased did not interfere in the lives of the living but appeared only to reassure them that they were well in the afterlife. My next interlocutor, Iva (F, 1986), became spiritual and developed her own connection with a god after beginning to practise Kundalini yoga in her twenties. Discussions about the afterlife had never taken place in her family, which motivated her to seek her own understanding. She encountered ideas about reincarnation and karmic connections in a Kundalini yoga course and felt they made sense. She explains that she perceives messages from her significant deceased during transcendental states or when her intuition is heightened. She sometimes experiences her grandmother’s presence – or even sees her – during meditation, which she describes as a positive experience. She interprets these visits as expressions of the deceased’s wish to spend time with her.

She goes on to describe the moral way of life of her grandparents, especially their openness in accepting one another and maintaining close bonds, despite belonging to different religions – Muslim and Orthodox Christian. She stresses that respectful and moral relationships were the norm in her family. Regarding her deceased grandmother, who appears to her in meditations, she specifically highlights that she was highly organised, efficient, self-reliant and clear-minded. She taught herself to read and write, worked consistently, and was deeply devoted to her family. Although my interlocutor did not know her well, as she passed away at a relatively young age, it is evident from her account that she regards her grandmother as a highly moral individual.

Amna’s and Iva’s cases both show that the positive experiences with the deceased described by my interlocutors were closely linked to the moral lives these souls had lived, and to their “good deaths”, which enabled them to reach the right place and a

peaceful state in the afterlife. Among the moral qualities most frequently mentioned in my material were harmonious relationships and an individual's dedication to their family. It was less common for interlocutors to emphasise their own role in the soul's transition to the afterlife, although Amna, for instance, pointed out that she had done everything she could during her mother's illness. However, in all these cases, good relationships in life continued as good relationships after death.

Similar experiences and understandings of contact with the deceased recurred throughout my fieldwork, but they are not common in other contexts in Bosnia and Herzegovina.⁹ I argue that the predominantly positive experiences with the deceased are related to the specific alternative spiritual understanding of the afterlife held by my interlocutors. As noted by Kaarina Koski (2016), alternative spiritualities can play a significant role in interpreting extraordinary and metaphysical experiences. Apart from the specific understandings found in alternative spiritual circles, there has also been a wider change in relationships with the deceased in contemporary society. Dennis Klass (2014: 106) notes that the hostile dead have almost completely disappeared, while the deceased increasingly take on supportive or encouraging roles. Together with Robert Goss (2005), he interprets these changes within the context of wider social transformations. Transnational consumer capitalism has freed individuals from the interpersonal obligations and role-based obligations tied to social membership. As a result, personal bonds – both among the living and the dead – have become more fluid. They can be chosen, reshaped or discontinued when they no longer provide satisfaction. This flexibility is reflected in relationships with the deceased, allowing the living to determine which aspects of the bond continue after death, thereby relieving tensions in the bond. However, I do not view these two interpretations as separated. Alternative spirituality itself is a product of the contemporary industrial and post-industrial context (Sutcliffe, Bowman, 2000: 8) in which individualism represents one of the most significant social shifts. For my interlocutors, alternative spirituality constituted a central conceptual framework within which the deceased occupy an important place – as is evident from the research material presented above.

As my interlocutors interpreted experiences of contact with the deceased and understood life after death in a spiritual way, the deceased who had lived moral lives and died a “good death” tended to convey positive messages or offer guidance along the interlocutors' life paths. This represents a novelty shaped by contemporary societal changes. What aligns more closely with traditional understandings of relationships with the dead in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as in broader European contexts, is the notion of the “stuck” dead. These are the deceased who either did not live a moral life or died a “bad death” and are therefore perceived as being “stuck” – either in the world of the living, in an intermediate realm, or in the “wrong” world. I will discuss their condition and the ways in which they exert agency over the living in the following chapter.

⁹ For contact with the deceased understood as frightening and related to breaking the moral norms in rural BiH, see Mencej, 2024; 2025; for the deceased considered as unpleasant, unnatural, dangerous visitors in BiH, see Softić, 2016: 276–28; for a general prohibition against disturbing the deceased in vernacular beliefs, see Softić, 2016: 8.

WHAT ABOUT THE SOULS THAT ARE STUCK?

In anthropology, stuckness has primarily been examined in the context of people immobilised during migration (Cangià, 2020; Dantzer, 2023; Chemlali, 2024), caught in spatiotemporal entrapment within political systems (Jansen, 2015: 157–185), or in situations of crisis (Hage, 2009: 97). Ghassan Hage (2009: 97) conceptualised stuckness as the opposite of the feeling that one is “going somewhere”. In contrast, in my analysis, stuckness refers to the obstruction of personal growth and the possibility of spiritual development in the afterlife – an aspect that, as demonstrated in the previous section, is often regarded as the central purpose of the afterlife among alternative spiritual communities.

Tatiana Bužeková, in her research on neo-shamanism, concludes that the topography of the otherworld is structured according to a “moral assessment of the behaviour of the dead” (Bužeková, 2025: 121). Souls can therefore reach the “right” place only through moral behaviour during their lifetime, whereas those who fail to do so become stuck in the wrong place – such as the world of the living. Among her neo-shamanic interlocutors, moral behaviour and spatiality also extend to the influence that the deceased exert on the living. The deceased who reside in the “right” place have a positive impact on the living, while those who remain stuck in the “wrong” place exert a negative impact. Bužeková (2025: 133–134) thus concludes that spatiality is closely intertwined with the concept of right and wrong behaviour – of both the living and the dead.

Within the broader spiritual communities I studied, similar ideas were present. The concept of stuckness appeared frequently among individuals and groups, particularly followers of Mohanji, neo-shamans, and participants in family constellation rituals. Several interlocutors explained that souls could become stuck either in the world of the living, between worlds (that is, between the world of the living and that of the dead) or in the “wrong” place – such as the “lower world” in neo-shamanic cosmology. Beyond the idea of being located in an improper realm, many also emphasised another dimension of stuckness – the soul’s inability to grow. Souls can become stuck for a variety of reasons, most of which were linked to morality – such as “bad death” (especially suicide, abortion, or sudden death), insufficient spiritual energy resulting from a non-spiritual life, immoral conduct, lack of fulfilment, or continued attachment to people or things in the world of the living due to an unwillingness to accept their death.

Stuck souls were generally perceived as lacking agency over their own fate and as dependent on the assistance of the living – particularly ritual specialists such as neo-shamans, energy healers, and others – in order to transition to the other world. While remaining between worlds for a short period after death was not necessarily viewed negatively, stuckness – that is, a prolonged inability to move on and to grow – was, without exception, regarded as undesirable by my interlocutors. Such souls were predominantly understood as unconscious, unpeaceful, or even suffering. They were largely seen as passive, although at times they were described as actively meddling in the lives of the living.

Luka, a member of the Spiritual Science Research Foundation, told me about his experience of the negative impact of stuck ancestors.¹⁰ For him, the influence of stuck ancestors becomes evident when the same problem recurs within a family, which, he explained, had also happened in his case:

One of the signs of ancestral influence is when similar or identical things keep happening across generations in a family. If you observe that in a certain family – well, in my father's lineage for instance, there was much alcoholism. Many were addicted to alcohol. Not officially diagnosed as alcoholics, but they all drank heavily. Many broken marriages – my parents divorced, his [father's] brother divorced, my uncles divorced. /.../ On the other side, premature deaths or childhood deaths. In my family specifically, several died of cancer in their 40s and so on. My father's siblings died as children. My brother's wife too – she died from a brain haemorrhage. You see, when there's this kind of disharmony in a family, when things keep happening repeatedly – that's one of the signs that ancestral influence exists. (Luka, M, 1971)

In his view, the primary reason why the deceased – ancestors – become stuck is a lack of spiritual energy. Spiritual energy, he explained, is primarily cultivated through regular meditation, but also through moral living. Insufficient spiritual energy means certain deceased remain close to the Earth, whereas spiritually fulfilled individuals are lighter and therefore able to ascend – “like in physics” – to higher realms. The proximity of certain ancestors to the Earth thus enables them to exert an influence on the living:

Not all people are good. Some do bad things in life – they lie, steal, cause problems for others – and when they leave their physical body, they will still carry those characteristics. They just won't have a physical body anymore, so they'll continue to exert a negative influence on people. And those who have such predispositions will be more easily influenced by them. (Luka, M, 1971)

Like Luka, other interlocutors told me that stuck or restless souls found themselves in such states as a consequence of their immoral behaviour during life or as a result of dying a “bad death”. Often, individuals perceived as immoral or not spiritually developed were considered more vulnerable to their influence. I did not record a clear distinction in the state in the afterlife between people belonging to these two categories, but they were understood as being interconnected – immoral individuals were more likely to die a “bad death”. A recurring theme was suicide, which was seen both as a “bad death” and as an immoral act.

¹⁰ He explains that as many as seven generations of ancestors can influence individuals, with the most recent three generations exerting an even stronger influence.

To illustrate the distinction between those who die a “good death” and those who die a “bad death”, I once again turn to Iva (F, 1986), the interlocutor cited above. She described her experience of contact with her deceased grandmother, whom she sensed during meditation. Iva emphasised that her grandmother had lived a moral life, followed her own path, achieved many things and ultimately died a “good death”. For this reason, Iva explained, she does not “feel her own ancestors as a burden” (Iva, F, 1986). The situation, she added, is different for those who died in the war (1992–1995) and are either insufficiently remembered – because the circumstances of their death are unknown – or are remembered too intensely. In such cases, these souls may become stuck, and she senses their presence in various places across Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Because what is felt here, what I can say is that, in some way, the souls are often stuck. That is, somehow stuck either because, for example, it was not sufficiently made known what happened – meaning, you know, that it was completely neglected, not spoken about, or pushed aside – or, on the other hand, because of the sorrow and grief of those who remained, who somehow did not let them cross over. /.../ I know that in certain parts of Bosnia this can be felt. And one senses that physical heaviness in the space. (Iva, F, 1986)

She specifically mentioned Omarska, Prijedor, Bosanska Krupa and Ahmići, emphasising that the deaths of many Bosniaks there were neglected. The remains of numerous victims have still not been recovered, preventing the proper rites of passage from being performed. As their deaths were not acknowledged, she argues, forgiveness was impossible, and the souls of the deceased could not find closure (for the postwar neglect of deceased Bosniaks in Prijedor, see Hamer, 2025; 2026). Iva notes that such unsettled souls can bring a sense of heaviness to the living, which she feels in such places.

In some cases, the deceased were believed to become entities,¹¹ and in others, to be possessed by them. As entities, the deceased could attach themselves to the living and cause harm or stimulate unwanted behaviour. My next interlocutor is a follower of Mohanji who carries out spiritual practices aimed at clearing entities from her clients. She tells me that the signs that someone has an entity attached include: “*if ugly thoughts come to your mind, if you’re too negative, if you’re feeling blocked or stuck*” (Amina, F, 1978). In the following passage, she describes how such entities can attach themselves to people:

So, if a soul – how should I put it – if a soul doesn’t fully let go of the body, depending on the manner of death... If it’s a case of suicide especially, but also other kinds of death like murder and suicide and so on, then these individuals, these souls actually, if for instance someone was meant

¹¹ My interlocutors understood *entities* as encompassing a wide range of metaphysical beings, including the deceased. In most cases, it was the deceased who were perceived as *stuck* and as exerting a negative influence – or agency – over the living.

to live to age 70 but committed suicide at 40 – how are they supposed to fulfil that karma? They still have that karma to live out, but no body. Then they can become entities looking for a body – the body of someone who has a tendency or potential to live out what they themselves still need to experience. If someone enjoys alcohol, and that spirit also loved alcohol, it will go to that person. And because of that, all low-frequency emotions in people – like anger, judgment, jealousy, envy, sorrow – these are all low frequencies, and they thin out our aura. Then we become vulnerable, accessible to such beings, to such entities. (Amina, F, 1978)

Alongside Mohanji's followers, neo-shamanists were also among the spiritual groups working with the stuck dead. In neo-shamanic cosmology, my interlocutor Nika explains, there are many worlds, each corresponding to different states of being. She describes how enlightened souls may pass into the collective realm, how most souls are reincarnated to continue their journey, and how some souls can become stuck between worlds:

There are those who become stuck in grief, who refuse their own death, who die unwillingly or do not believe they are dead at all. These are the souls that cling desperately to this world. In shamanism, we call them the ones trapped between worlds – belonging nowhere, suspended. (Nika, F, 1975)

Some neo-shamanists also made a distinction between the “upper”¹² and “lower” worlds within their afterlife cosmology. In determining which world a soul enters after death, the distinction between conscious and unconscious living – and dying – is crucial. Souls who lived consciously and fulfilled their life purpose automatically go to the “upper world”. In contrast, those who lived unconsciously and without fulfilment may become trapped in the “lower world”. Stuck souls, either stuck in the “lower” world or in between worlds, are believed to exert a negative influence on the living. Another practitioner of neo-shamanism explained to me the distinction between the different states in which ancestors may find themselves and how their afterlife situation affects the living:

So shamanism speaks both of the reality of ancestors who took advantage of life, and of the reality of ancestors who carry certain debts, who carry certain energies, who haven't released the stories of their emotions. There are very serious states in which ancestral energy and souls can become stuck, suffer greatly, and struggle intensely. /.../ The more healed they are, the freer a life we can live. (Emir, M, 1970)

¹² My interlocutor clarifies that the “Upper” and “Lower” worlds do not represent a binary opposition, but rather different dimensions of existence: “*The Lower World is not inherently negative. It is far more than just the realm of the dead. Here dwell our power animals, our ancestors – a place beyond simple spatial dimensions. Think of it rather as a temporal continuum: if you view time linearly, this becomes the past. Past, present and future exist here as one. It is less about ‘below’ or ‘above’, and more about the eternal flow of existence itself.*” (Nika, F, 1975)

In neo-shamanism, as well as in other spiritual groups, the negative influence of the deceased could be countered by the living through helping stuck souls. Emir explained that shamanic rituals can help the deceased and, in so doing, free the living from their negative influence. Amina, a previous interlocutor and a follower of Mohanji, also spoke of her spiritual cleansing practices, which are intended to help stuck souls pass to the “right” place and thereby remove their harmful effects. According to an interlocutor from the Spiritual Science Research Foundation, the solution to the negative impact of ancestors lies in spiritual energy – gained through regular meditation and specific mantras – which the living are meant to send to the dead. Similarly, within family constellation workshops, rituals were occasionally performed to help stuck souls move on to the “right” place.

My interlocutors consistently associated the notion of “stuckness”, or the inability to cross into the other world, with questions of morality. Most often, it was attributed to the failure of the deceased to observe moral norms – debts, unresolved emotions, lying, stealing – while at other times, it was associated with a “bad death” – such as dying in war,¹³ suicide, a death that was not accepted, or the absence of a proper burial ritual for other reasons. Ideas about a lack of morality or a “bad death” preventing souls from passing into the otherworld are not specific to spiritual cosmology, but are also present in vernacular notions in Bosnia and Herzegovina and beyond.

Mirjam Mencej notes that in vernacular understandings – not only in Bosnia, but also elsewhere in Europe – those who die a “bad death” are believed to be unable to pass into the otherworld. As a result, they may become stuck and appear as ghosts or cause trouble among the living (Mencej, 2025: 352; see also Risteski, 1999; Cowdell, 2011: 59–62; Softić, 2016: 266–267; Čepulienė, Pučinskaitė, 2023: 13). Lyudmila N. Vinogradova (1999: 44–49) writes that in Slavic folklore, the concept of a “good death” was associated with a natural death, a death within “one’s own life term”, and the proper observance of rituals. The category of the “unclean” dead, who could become actively harmful and affect the living, included those who died a “bad death”: by suicide, murder, or violence; those who died “before their time”, at an inappropriate age, or away from home and relatives. A deceased person could also become “unclean” if funerary customs were not properly observed, if they had been in contact with evil spirits during life, or if they failed to sever ties with the living before death.

Dragana Djurić (2024: 4–5) notes that in Slavic folklore, the souls of the deceased fall into two categories: the “good” or “pure” deceased and the “impure” deceased, who have no proper place in the otherworld. She notes that this categorisation depends both on how a person lived – their morality – and on how they died. Although the “pure” deceased can help the living, such assistance depends on the attitudes and care the living show them. By contrast, the “impure” deceased, who are usually positioned between the two worlds, “disturb the living by bringing them misfortune, sickness and death” (Djurić, 2024: 5). Similarly, Claude Lecouteux (2009: 26–27, 134–135) observes that in Germanic folklore from the 10th to the 13th centuries, the “dreadful dead” were those

¹³ Surprisingly, I did not come across many other narratives that would link “stuckness” with those who died in war, apart from the narrative described above.

who had no proper rite of passage, sought revenge, were killed or drowned, died of illness, or were socially marginalised. Although in my material the “stuck” souls were not always regarded as dreadful, their state of stuckness was nonetheless attributed to the moral condition of the deceased.

The category of the “stuck” dead among my interlocutors aligned closely with the more traditional ideas described above. However, their notions of a “good” and a “bad” death differed slightly from traditional understandings. Those who experienced a “bad death” were generally described as people who had committed suicide, died in violent circumstances, or had not accepted their death for some reason. Similar to traditional notions, the proper performance of rituals remained important: if the prescribed rituals were not carried out correctly, the deceased could remain in a liminal state. Some interlocutors also emphasised that excessive grief could prevent the soul from moving on. What was stressed more strongly, however, was the importance of fulfilling one’s spiritual role in this world – a theme largely absent from more traditional narratives. Another category, rarely mentioned in older traditions, concerned those who died a conscious death – a notion understood as an additional requirement for achieving a “good death”. A focus on personal growth thus became essential for achieving a good death (and a good afterlife), reflecting contemporary norms and expectations that place self-development at the centre of a meaningful life.

CONCLUSION

The theory of continuing bonds suggests that after death, people maintain social relationships with the deceased (Klass et al., 1996). This proved to be an accurate assumption in the context of experiences with the deceased among alternative spiritual practitioners in Bosnia and Herzegovina, for whom the deceased remain part of society (cf. Klass, 2014: 104). Nonetheless, my interlocutors expressed these continuing bonds in specific ways. Many authors argue that reciprocity is a key concept for understanding relationships between the living and the deceased (see Walter, 2019; Hesz, 2025; Mencej, 2025; Pócs, 2025). In many (especially Abrahamic) religions, it is typically assumed that after death it is the living who have the duty to care for the deceased (for Islam see Mabrouk, 1987; Venhorst, 2013; for Catholicism see Hesz, 2025: 87). Numerous studies have shown that the living are expected to care for the deceased, pray for them, and help them attain a higher spiritual status. The living are often thought to owe this to the deceased, who gave them life, identity, or inheritance (see Klass, 2014; Djurić, 2024; Tolstaya, 2024; Hesz, 2025; Mencej, 2025; Pócs, 2025).

In contrast, the same ideas of debt were not present among my interlocutors, and their understanding of reciprocity with the deceased was modified. Among spiritual practitioners in Bosnia and Herzegovina, reciprocity was manifested in the expectation that the deceased take care of the living, providing help and guidance, while the living, in return, assist souls that are stuck. This represents a shift in the principle of reciprocity between the living and the deceased. Whereas traditionally the actions of the deceased

during their lifetime created a moral debt that the living were expected to repay through ritual care, here it is the deceased who predominantly care for the living, thus appearing as benevolent figures. I interpret this shift within the conceptual framework of alternative spirituality, in which the deceased are seen as benevolent and the afterlife as a space where it is possible to grow continuously.

Moreover, I agree with Dennis Klass and Robert Goss (2005), who argue that the hostile dead have disappeared from contemporary society due to broader social transformations – such as individualism, the decline of rigid role expectations, and the increasing fluidity with which people can choose, reshape and end relationships, a dynamic that extends into relationships after death. I understand ideas and concepts within alternative spirituality as profoundly shaped by post-modern times. In this sense, alternative spirituality does not stand apart from these wider transformations but is deeply interwoven with the very societal shifts that Klass and Goss describe.

However, in my material, “stuck” souls were still perceived as requiring help from the living, a view that resonates with ideas traditionally present in Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as in wider European contexts (see Risteski, 1999; Cowdell, 2011: 59–62; Softić, 2016: 266–267; Čepulienė, Pučinskaitė, 2023: 13; Djurić, 2024; Mencej, 2025: 352). Thus, in my interlocutors’ explanations, different interpretive frameworks and conceptual repertoires are mobilised simultaneously. Alongside more traditional understandings of the deceased and their needs, they also draw on contemporary frameworks, particularly those of alternative spirituality which are themselves shaped by contemporary conceptions of the self, morality and relationality.

Yet, the moral principle regulating relationships between the living and the dead remained significant. Traditionally, the deceased in Bosnia and Herzegovina were believed to appear to the living when social norms were violated, thereby reinforcing moral and communal order – also including the principles governing relationships between the living and the dead (see Mencej, 2024; 2025). In contrast to these traditional Bosnian contexts, spiritual practitioners no longer consider the deceased to act as moral enforcers or punitive agents, but rather as compassionate figures offering comfort and guidance. The deceased do not interfere in the non-moral actions of the living. Instead, it is the (spiritual) living who are responsible for helping those deceased who are being punished for their immorality or who died a “bad death”, and who consequently remain stuck in this world, between worlds, or in the wrong world. In this sense, the deceased continue to function as moral figures, yet they are no longer seen as beings who intentionally warn the living about their moral failings. Rather, they exert unconscious negative influences regardless of the behaviour of the living, or they shape people’s moral imagination through the example of their own fate.

This shift, however, does not negate the link between cosmology and morality, as noted by Andrew Strathern and Pamela J. Stewart (2007 in Mencej, 2025: 345–356). Instead, it reconfigures it. The moral imperative is no longer centred solely on respecting communal norms but also encompasses the individual’s spiritual progress. The central opposition thus becomes between “growth” and “stuckness” – in life as well as in the afterlife – echoing Ghassan Hage’s (2009) observation that positive feelings are associated with

“moving”, here understood as internal, existential progress. This reflects a broader moral cosmology in which morality is not institutionally enforced but operates on a spiritual level (Strathern, Stewart, 2007 in Mencej, 2025: 345–356), where cosmological and moral order remain intertwined. As Jan Bremmer (2002: 101–102) noted, in the modern worldview the individual’s progress has become a central goal in life, a logic reflected in conceptions of the afterlife – not only in the idea of the continuous growth of moral and spiritual souls, but also in the punishment of immoral souls who failed to fulfil their spiritual role in this world and are therefore denied progress through stuckness.

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STATEMENT ON RESEARCH DATA MANAGEMENT

The author states that the article is based on research data, which is stored in ADP – Social Science Data Archives, Ljubljana, Slovenia – and are available to others on the basis of a justified request.

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»RAST« IN »ZATAKNJENOST«: MORALNOST, POSMRTHNO ŽIVLJENJE IN VPLIV MRTVIH NA ŽIVE

Članek obravnava predstave o posmrtnem življenju in izkušnje z mrtvimi med pripadniki alternativnih duhovnih gibanj v Bosni in Hercegovini (BiH). Temelji na šestmesečnem terenskem delu v Sarajevu in Banji Luki, ki je obsegalo 105 polstrukturiranih intervjujev in opazovanje z udeležbo. Glavni raziskovalni vprašanji sta bili: (1) kakšne so specifične predstave o posmrtnem življenju med pripadniki alternativnih duhovnosti v BiH in (2) kako so s temi predstavami povezane njihove izkušnje z mrtvimi?

Ugotovitve kažejo, da med udeleženci prevladuje verovanje v reinkarnacijo. To vsebuje specifične ideje kontinuirane rasti duše, ki v veliki meri izvirajo iz teozofskega razumevanja reinkarnacije. Sogovorniki navajajo, da bistvo sosledja reinkarnacij vidijo v duhovni rasti posameznika/duše, zato kot cilj življenja, pa tudi smrti in posmrtnega, postavljajo prav duhovni razvoj. V tem smislu pogosto poudarjajo idejo predinkarnacijskih sporazumov in možnosti dostopa do prejšnjih življenj preko regresoterapije. Sogovorniki pri tem pogosto uporabljajo znanstveni diskurz, s katerim legitimirajo svoje ideje. Navajajo, da so njihovo zanimanje in podrobne predstave o posmrtnem življenju v nasprotju z njihovo vzgojo, ki je bila v veliki meri ateistična, posmrtno življenje pa tako ni bilo pomembno vprašanje.

Predstave o posmrtnem življenju kot prostoru rasti in duhovnega doma duše se odražajo tudi v izkušnjah z mrtvimi. Večinsko so bile te izkušnje pozitivne, mrtvi so se v življenjih živih pojavljali kot podporniki ob težkih trenutkih, kot duhovno vodstvo, včasih pa tudi le zato, da bi z živimi ohranjali družbene vezi. Članek nadalje prikaže, da so bile take izkušnje večinske pri mrtvih, ki so živeli moralna življenja in imeli lepe odnose z bližnjimi, ki so se po smrti torej nadaljevali. Drugačne, pogosto obremenjujoče izkušnje se povezujejo z mrtvimi, ki niso živeli moralnih življenj ali so umrli zaradi »slabe smrti« – zaradi samomora, nasilne smrti, smrt v vojni, nepripravljeni na smrt – ali pa zanje ni bil izveden ustrezen ritual prehoda. Duše takih mrtvih so bile razumljene kot »zatakne« – bodisi med svetom živih in mrtvih, na svetu živih, bodisi pa v napačnem posmrtnem prostoru. Zaradi svoje

umeščnosti so imeli ti mrtvi pogosto negativen vpliv na žive. To se je med živimi lahko odražalo v neharmoničnih odnosih znotraj družine, zasvojenostih, občutkih zataknjenosti, depresiji, občutku teže na določenih prostorih ali pa na drugačne načine oviralo razvoj posameznika.

Recipročnost med živimi in mrtvimi se tako kaže na način, da mrtvi, ki so v posmrtnem prostoru na pravem mestu, pomagajo, svetujejo in tolažijo žive. Medtem pa živi – predvsem duhovni specialisti – s svojimi dejanji pomagajo mrtvim, ki so ostali zataknjeni, da bi se lahko premaknili na pravo posmrtno mesto. Na ta način lahko tudi zmanjšajo njihov negativen vpliv na žive. Ključna ugotovitev raziskave je, da moralni okviri oblikujejo »duhovno topografijo« posmrtnega sveta. Ta topografija pa ne oblikuje le položaja in stanja duš po smrti, temveč tudi njihov vpliv na žive.

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Lines of Descent in Alternative Spirituality: Experiencing the Agency of Ancestors through Spiritual Energy

Tatiana Bužeková

This paper presents the results of ethnographic research carried out in Bratislava, the capital of Slovakia, among people who adhere to various spiritual ideas and practices. I consider the role of lines of descent in shaping how people experience the agency of the dead. I argue that, within urban spiritual milieus, descent lines are linked to the concept of energy that connects the world of the deceased with that of the living. Specific cultural settings influence the concept of personhood and, consequently, experiences of the agency of ancestors. A focus on individualism, combined with a moral emphasis on personal development, gives rise to specific interpretations of these experiences, as well as to a specific type of essentialism grounded in moral reasoning.

KEYWORDS: alternative spirituality, the agency of the dead, ancestors, spiritual energy, moral essentialism

Članek predstavlja rezultate etnografske raziskave, izvedene v Bratislavi, glavnem mestu Slovaške, med ljudmi, ki sledijo različnim duhovnim idejam in praksam. Obravnavam vlogo rodovnih linij pri oblikovanju načina, kako ljudje doživljajo delovanje mrtvih. Trdim, da so znotraj urbanih duhovnih miljejev rodovne linije povezane s konceptom energije, ki povezuje svet pokojnih s svetom živih. Specifična kulturna okolja vplivajo na pojmovanje osebnosti oziroma osebe in posledično na izkušnje delovanja prednikov. Osredotočenost na individualizem, skupaj z moralnim poudarkom na osebnem razvoju, vodi do specifičnih interpretacij teh izkušenj ter do posebne vrste esencializma, utemeljenega na moralnem presojanju.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: alternativna duhovnost, delovanje mrtvih, predniki, duhovna energija, moralni esencializem

INTRODUCTION

In various theories within the social sciences and humanities, the dead are understood as active participants in social life, linked to social organisation, emotions, the physical environment, political power and digital representations (e.g. Harper, 2010; Crandall, Martin, 2014; Hudson, 2023). In anthropological studies, the general category of the dead includes the important concept of ancestors, which began to develop through the influential ethnographic debates of the 1960s, in which African ancestors became the prototypes for those in other world regions (Hill, Hageman, 2016). It was demonstrated that in traditional societies, the agency of ancestors has been manifested through their

ongoing influence or active presence in the lives of the living achieved through cultural practices, such as rituals, storytelling, and totemic or clan systems, etc. Within this context, lines of descent – understood as socially recognised genealogical connections between ancestors and descendants – play an important role (Itao, Kaneko, 2022). Here, descent is conceived not merely as biological lineage but as the transmission of spiritual essence, vital force or ancestral power. Many related cultural practices are based on altered states of consciousness (hereinafter ASC), which are supposed to facilitate contact with the spiritual realm (see, for example, Boddy, 1994; Glidden, 1995; Payne, 2012; Hume, 2013; Igreja, 2018; Richman, 2020; Ciofalo, 2023; Roothaan, Bello, 2024).

Today, ancestors as a distinct category of the dead have also emerged in the context of alternative spiritual movements, especially in neo-paganism, which seeks to revive ancestral religions, as well as in urban shamanism, which draws on various traditions – again, with a focus on ancestors as bearers of sacred or spiritual knowledge. These spiritual currents, however, do not constitute a unified movement; rather, they comprise a diverse set of concepts and practices that do not always assume institutionalised or at least organised forms. In Europe and North America, they have gradually gained importance since the mid-twentieth century (Heelas, 1996; Sutcliffe, Bowman, 2000; Heelas et al., 2005; Aupers, Houtman, 2010). At present, alternative spiritual currents are no longer a phenomenon limited to a comparatively marginal subculture. As Wouter Hanegraaf (2000: 289) observes, they have developed into a form of broad “folk religion” that appeals to many people across different social strata. In Central and Eastern Europe, the growth of alternative spiritual currents has taken place in a specific way, shaped significantly by the political context and the officially negative attitude to religions during the socialist era. The fall of communist regimes in the 1990s not only changed the situation of established churches, but also opened the doors for new forms of spirituality (Tižik, 2006; Smoczyński, 2016; Ališauskienė, 2017; Dyndová, 2020).

In spiritual milieux, the connection between the notion of spiritual energy and ASC also plays an important role in both individual and collective practices (e.g. Luhrmann, 1989; Greenwood, 2000; Butler, 2015; Davy, 2023). However, the connection between spiritual energy and lines of descent – so important in the context of traditional societies – has not yet been sufficiently explored, although the category of ancestors plays an important role in relevant ethnographic studies (e.g. Butler, 2015; Galovič, 2021; Seigfried, 2021; Davy, 2023; Dyndová, 2024). In this paper, I present the results of ethnographic research carried out in Bratislava, the capital of Slovakia, among people who adhere to various spiritual ideas and practices, especially urban shamanism and Wicca, a nature-based neo-pagan movement. In my analysis, I will consider the following questions:

- What is the role of lines of descent in people’s experiences with the dead?
- How are lines of descent connected to the concept of spiritual energy?

I argue that people’s experiences of the agency of ancestors are influenced by concrete cultural settings because the interpretation of such experiences depends on culture-specific notions of personhood. Therefore, (1) in the context of urban spiritual milieux, descent lines connect the world of the dead and the world of the living by means of spiritual energy through which people experience the agency of the dead; and (2) the emphasis on

personal spiritual development and individual responsibility, characteristic of contemporary spirituality, results in specific interpretations of the agency of ancestors conditioned by moral essentialism.

In the first section of this paper, I will address relevant theoretical ideas and empirical studies, and will explore the specific cultural conditions of spiritual milieu. Subsequently, I will describe my fieldwork and present the results of analysis of ethnographic data. I will interpret my interlocutors' accounts through theories that consider the universal properties of the human mind as well as cultural diversity and individual experiences.

THE AGENCY OF ANCESTORS AND THE CONCEPT OF PERSONHOOD IN SPIRITUAL MILIEUX

Many ethnographic studies have demonstrated that the concept of spiritual energy or force is widely distributed across cultures. It is typically described as non-material and connected with life, consciousness, or the soul. In India, for example, it is referred to as *prana*, a life-sustaining force of living beings; in Afro-Brazilian religions the notion of *axé* is understood as an invisible force that is both magical and sacred, fundamental to all existence, whether physical or spiritual; in Polynesia, the concept of *mana* refers to divine powers that are diffused and transmitted throughout the universe; and in Chinese philosophy the term *ch'i (qi)* describes an energetic fluid that vitalises the body and circulates outside us as air (Roazzi et al., 2015: 145–146).

Experiences of the agency of ancestors through spiritual force occur across cultures in many forms. In this context, altered states of consciousness serve as a medium through which the living may invoke, perceive, or embody the dead (e.g. Payne, 2012; Richman, 2020). One of the most widespread ideas is possession, understood as the temporary loss of control over an individual's body, which is believed to be controlled by spirits or ancestors. Through possession, the dead actively intervene in moral, social or political affairs, correcting injustices or delivering messages (Boddy, 1994; Cohen, 2008; Igreja, 2018). Dreams are also a common medium for ancestral communication, especially in societies where dreamtime is considered part of a sacred cosmology (e.g. Hume, 2013). Another widespread notion is the shamanic journey, during which a shaman uses ASC to contact spirits or ancestors in order to solve the problems of individuals or a community (Atkinson, 1992). In contemporary urban environments, these traditional practices have given rise to spiritual movements such as urban shamanism or neo-shamanism.

The emergence of this movement has been ascribed to the post-war transformation caused by the decline of the great colonial empires and the rise of national movements in Third World countries. In this process, non-Western traditions – formerly seen as backward and irrational – were re-interpreted in terms of the universal spirituality of humankind (Znamenski, 2007). Since the 1970s, the world-wide non-profit organisation Foundation for Shamanic Studies has promoted “core shamanism”, an inclusive and universalist concept based on the re-interpretation of many native traditions (Foundation for Shamanic Studies, n.d.a). It should be noted, however, that in contemporary spiritual

milieux there are many other versions of shamanism, and the term “shamanism” can have various meanings (Kehoe, 1997: 307). Also, the term “shaman” can be synonymous with “magic practitioner” (Magliocco, 2015).

Magic and witchcraft are central notions in Wicca, a neo-pagan, syncretic religion centred on the worship of nature through the maintenance of sacred tradition and knowledge. Thus, it also concentrates on nature and ancestral traditions; however, in contrast to the universalism of neo-shamanism, ancestors in Wicca are understood as the peoples of Northern and Western Europe. Wicca emerged in mid twentieth-century Britain and was first presented as the survival of an ancient pre-Christian Cult, in which witches were interpreted as servants of a Goddess and her husband. After spreading to North America, it diversified under the influence of environmentalism, feminism and the 1960s counter-culture. It came to be presented as a Goddess-centred religion based on witchcraft as a form of nature veneration, a representation that was popularised by mass media. Wicca has developed into various branches including “Gardnerian Wicca”, which claims direct lineage from Gerald Gardner who established this religious movement; “Dianic Wicca”, shaped by second-wave feminism; and “Reclaiming Witchcraft”, a form of feminist “ecospirituality”. At present, Wicca counts hundreds of thousands of adherents worldwide (Pearson, 2002; White, 2015).

In neo-pagan movements and neo-shamanism, both deceased family members and distant ancestors are represented as conscious beings who can guide people’s decisions, intervene in matters of protection or healing, and offer wisdom or warnings through dreams, signs, and mediumship (e.g. Greenwood, 2000; Butler, 2015; Seigfried, 2021; Davy, 2023). People with alternative worldviews often seek a reconnection with their ancestral roots, a phenomenon particularly well documented in contexts of colonial displacement or cultural loss (e.g. Lan, 1985; Lebaka, 2019; Podolecka, Nthoi, 2021; Ciofalo, 2023). Importantly, in contemporary spiritual milieux, deceased family members can be represented as sources of energy providing empowerment through dream visions or ASC (e.g. Bowman, 2002; Magliocco, 2015; Ivnik, 2025). Due to the eclectic nature of contemporary spirituality, both shamans and neo-pagans can use various spiritual techniques that are not tied to concrete movements or currents. One of the most popular forms of ritualised healing of relationships by means of connection with deceased family members is a specific practice called the Family Constellation method. It is commonly understood as a psychotherapeutic approach that aims to reveal unconscious patterns and entanglements that may be causing present-day difficulties for individuals, thereby helping them to understand and potentially resolve these issues.¹ In spiritual milieux, this method can be combined with esoteric ideas and overlaps with energetic healing (Gyimesi, 2023). Deceased family members and lineage play a central role in such interpretations of psychological problems.²

¹ The Family Constellation method is considered a trans-generational, phenomenological, therapeutic intervention with roots in family systems therapy, existential phenomenology, and the ancestor reverence of the South African Zulus (Cohen, 2006). It is recognised by family therapy associations in many countries; however, its blending of ritual and therapy provokes significant scepticism in clinical psychology circles, especially regarding its lack of clinical standardisation and its quasi-spiritual elements (Boring, 2012).

² See, for instance Zen My Mind, n.d.

Experiences of the agency of the dead – particularly in the case of deceased family members or ancestors – can be influenced by personal relationships and family stories. In general, anthropologists have tended to emphasise that the meanings of agency differ substantially across different social, cultural and historical contexts. In addition to the agency of living human beings, this category includes relational and more-than-human forms of agency, such as the agency of spirits or supernatural beings (Vorhölter, 2024). In the cognitive theory of religion proposed by Pascal Boyer (2001), human agents are defined as beings that possess mental features, such as desires, beliefs, memories, intentions and expectations; and supernatural agents are depicted as beings that possess all these mental features, while simultaneously violating fundamental expectations of human agency – for example, by not having a physical body, or by being able to fly or pass through walls. In elaboration of this theory, Emma Cohen and Justin Barrett (2011) shift the focus from human agency *per se* to the concept of personhood as the core of intuitive reasoning about supernatural agents and human agency in general.

The concept of personhood includes elements such as mentality, vitality and identity. Intuitions on mentality are produced by intuitive psychology (theory of mind), a set of brain structures and functions specialised in tasks such as detecting the presence of agents, figuring out their goals, and representing their thoughts and expectations (Boyer, 2001: 123). Intuitions on vitality are produced by another complex cognitive system called intuitive biology, which is grounded in ideas of biological essence or vital force: people intuitively expect that each biological species

has an underlying causal nature, or essence, that is uniquely responsible for the typical appearance, behaviour and ecological preferences of the kind. People in diverse cultures consider this essence responsible for the organism's identity as a complex, self-preserving entity governed by dynamic internal processes that are lawful even when hidden. (Atran, 1998: 548)

This causal-explanatory mechanism called “vitalistic causality” is therefore connected to some sort of essentialist intuitive theory (Roazzi et al., 2015: 150).

From this point of view, the idea that spiritual energy is transmitted through descent lines (e.g. ancestors, sacred bloodlines, shamanic inheritance) can be understood as emerging from several intertwined cognitive mechanisms:

- agent detection (Bering, 2002): ancestors are conceptualised as conscious presences;
- intuitive dualism (Barret et al., 2021): the soul is seen as separable from the body and thus capable of being inherited or passing from one body to another;
- teleological thinking (Scott, 2022): lineage is viewed as a purpose-driven force;
- psychological essentialism (Neufeld, 2022): a tendency to think that members of a certain category, including biological kinds and families, possess an underlying, unchangeable essence that defines their identity and properties.

In my interpretation, I will pay special attention to essentialism as a core aspect of human psychology that emerges and develops in early childhood. As Neufeld (2022) notices, recent empirical research indicates that essentialist thinking is rather complex,

arising from multiple early-emerging cognitive tendencies that converge during development. Ethnographic data also demonstrates that essentialism facilitates the emergence and transmission of various culturally wide-spread notions, including possession concepts (Cohen, 2008). Essentialist thinking is especially important in relation to the notions of personhood and inheritance, as it strongly influences how people view their identity (Marchery et al., 2023) and produces an intuition that personal traits or an invisible essence characteristic of a certain group are inherited (Bastian, Haslam, 2006; Wagner, 2024). Cohen and Barrett suggest, however, that the universal cognitive mechanisms underlying the concept of personhood may be activated in different ways depending on varying concepts, contexts and cultures.

In this regard, we can consider the ideas of Anthony Giddens (1991). He argues that in traditional cultures, individual lives correspond to stability of place, relationships and occupation, whereas in modern industrialised cultures, the course of life is composed of individual narratives that link different places, relationships and occupations. It has also been noted that in European and Western countries, the concept of personhood is influenced by individualism as an important aspect of Western cultural values (e.g. Howard, 2007; Joshanloo, Weijers, 2024). Indeed, it has been demonstrated that specific cultural settings in European urban milieux influence the formation of patterns of personhood that differ from those found in traditional societies (e.g. Kahaka, Maundeni, 2022).

Alternative spirituality is marked by a special accent on individuality. Despite the diversity of alternative spiritual currents, they share a common idea of an inner dimension, which places emphasis on personal spirituality and the “inner self” in contrast to institutionalised religions (Houtman, Tromp, 2021: 55; Houtman, Aupers, 2010: 6–7). In relation to the abovementioned theory – which explains ideas of personhood in terms of both the universal properties of the human mind and cultural context – we can ask: how is essentialist thinking manifested in accounts of people’s experiences with the dead in these concrete cultural settings?

In the next section of the paper, I will describe fieldwork that I have carried out in Bratislava, the capital of Slovakia, among people who are presently interested in various versions of shamanism, as well as other spiritual teachings, including Wicca.

FIELDWORK

The most recent census in Slovakia (Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic, 2021) demonstrated that the country’s religious structure has undergone certain changes during recent decades. It seems that the spiritual scene in Slovakia is both growing and becoming more complex.³ It is also important to note that different parts of the country

³ The census showed that the number of people belonging to the major churches has fallen, while the number of non-religious people has risen significantly. The largest group remains those identifying as Roman Catholic (3.04 million), accounting for up to 55.8% of the whole population. However, in comparison with the previous census in 2011, both their number and proportion have decreased by more than six percentage points, representing a decline of over 308,700 people. The second largest group (almost 1.3 million) consists of individuals with no

vary in terms of religious affiliation (Tížik, 2022; Nemčíková et al., 2023). Although no statistical data is yet available on the distribution of spiritual ideas and practices, it can reasonably be assumed that their spread is uneven. It appears likely that they are more readily embraced by urban populations, whereas rural areas are characterised by stronger adherence to Christianity.

My present fieldwork began in Bratislava in September 2023. I examined the world-views of three groups: (1) people engaged in various forms of shamanic practice; (2) people who attend events organised by the Wicca circle in Bratislava; and (3) people who hold spiritual views and/or engage in various spiritual practices without regularly participating in spiritual meetings. It should be noted that interlocutors across all three categories tend to combine various spiritual ideas in individual ways.

In my investigation of shamanic practices, I continued my previous research on neo-shamanism. The main role in the formation of neo-shamanic groups in Slovakia in the 1990s and the 2000s was played by the European branch of the Foundation for Shamanic Studies (hereinafter FSS), located in Vienna. I became familiar with this milieu in Bratislava in 2004 and carried out ethnographic research there between 2009 and 2011 (Bužeková, 2012). Since then, I have been in contact with people practicing shamanism in various forms. In my present research, I interviewed people attending FSS events as well as people who do not adhere to the concept of core shamanism and understand the word “shaman” in different ways.

Wicca has gained popularity in Slovakia in recent decades. It should be noted that private rituals associated with Wicca are dispersed and mostly invisible in public spaces. However, during the last decade, a circle has emerged in Bratislava that meets regularly on various occasions, including public rituals. It was formed around people who are connected to Wiccans in the UK. Due to their activities, Wicca has entered the media space and become attractive to spiritual seekers, despite opposition from Christian churches. The core of the Wicca circle is a coven – a closed group performing rituals not accessible to the public. Another “layer” of the circle consists of people who regularly attend workshops and the school of natural magic, established in Bratislava. Many of them also attend and/or organise other spiritual meetings, combining Wicca teachings with other ideas, such as Slavic neo-paganism or urban shamanism (see Bužeková, 2024).

So far, I have conducted 34 informal, semi-structured and in-depth interviews with 23 women and 7 men of various age categories (born between 1947 and 1991). Most of them experienced the political changes of the 1990s as adults or adolescents and have higher education. I have also carried out 15 instances of participant observation at various

religious affiliation. Their proportion increased from 13.4% in 2011 to 23.8% in 2021 (Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic, 2021). This change does not necessarily reflect an increase in non-belief but may 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; Tížik, 2023). In addition, 4,007 residents identify with the new census category “Paganism and natural spirituality”. It is also important to note that many spiritual practices are understood as forms of therapy (see, for example, Jerotijević, Hagovská, 2019; Jerotijević, 2025).

events organised by the FSS and the Wiccan circle, as well as at private meetings. In addition, I paid attention to my interlocutors' communication on social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram.

I maintain friendly relationships with my interlocutors whom I have known for a long time from my previous research. These relationships involve the mutual sharing of personal information as well as spiritual ideas. In addition to publicly accessible online communication, I have access to private communication in two closed WhatsApp groups and a private Facebook group, which helps me to maintain relationships with my interlocutors. My membership in these groups is based on mutual trust. All my interlocutors have been informed about my research and agree to participate. I do not use private information as research data without permission. At the same time, my deeper knowledge of their lives helps me better understand their ideas.

In the next section, I will present my interlocutors' experiences of deceased family members and ancestors through spiritual energy, and will pay attention to the role of descent lines in their accounts.⁴ I will demonstrate that, in urban spiritual milieux, the notion of spiritual energy permeating the universe influences the concept of personhood, especially in terms of essentialist thinking. At the same time, the emphasis on personal development as one of the main characteristics of alternative spirituality results in a special type of essentialism involving moral reasoning.

ANCESTORS AND LINES OF DESCENT

Giselle Vincett and Linda Woodhead (2009: 333) argue that contemporary spirituality often bears the imprint of an eco-discourse. This aspect is linked to the sacralisation of nature and the Romantic idea of a return to the ancestors' natural way of life (Luhmann, 1993; Stuckrad, 2002; Sage, 2009). Due to this Romantic emphasis on the past, ancestors often play a central role in spiritual ideas. This is particularly evident in Wicca, a neo-pagan movement in which ancestors are linked to Mother Earth and nature. Samuel (born in 1991), the leader of the Wiccan circle in Bratislava, describes the goal of the coven "The circle of Avalon Flame", in which he serves as the high priest, as follows:

... to bring people back to our ancient traditions and to Mother Earth. For everyone to find strength and help in their ancestors, healing and answers in nature, and love and harmony in the little things and rituals of everyday life. (Samuel, 1991)

Samuel and his circle follow the tradition of hedge witches, a specific kind of witches described in historical sources and ethnographies of British folk magic. They are believed to possess the ability to "ride the hedge" – that is, to traverse the boundary between the physical and spiritual worlds – and are known for their deep connection with nature,

⁴ The names of my interlocutors are pseudonymized.

particularly plants and herbs (Hutton, 2017; Van der Hoeven, 2022). Samuel emphasised the great importance of nature and ancestors both in interviews and during a seminar on communication with the dead that I attended in November 2023.

In neo-shamanism the romanticised concepts of nature and the “noble savage” are especially significant. As Dyndová (2024: 54) notices, ancient and indigenous peoples are portrayed as living in harmony with nature and possessing deep spiritual insight; contemporary shamans seek to reconnect with their lost knowledge, viewing it as a path to authentic spiritual life. Robert (born in 1963), a leader of the FSS circle in Bratislava, repeatedly referred to ancestors as teachers and guides for their descendants.

When referring to ancestors, both Samuel and Robert use the expression *rodové línie* – the Slovak equivalent of lines of descent. It should be noted that this term is derived from *rod* – a Slavic word encompassing meanings such as genus, family, clan or generations. In their accounts, *rodové línie* are primarily mentioned in connection with recurring family problems that are transmitted energetically. Both Samuel and Robert teach that dysfunction emerging in a family line can be changed after seven generations, echoing the idea of the healing power of seven generations of ancestors found in family constellation practice. Both leaders emphasise individual responsibility for one’s actions, linking it to the notion of ancestors. While Samuel interprets *rodové línie* in scientific terms – such as DNA or psychological notions like blocks and traumas – Robert speaks about a karmic connection with *rod*, stressing that people must be aware that any problem may persist but can also be stopped:

We live our lives and by our actions we create the conditions for the next seven generations and we shape the world. It is important that our children know the genesis of our lineage. The ancestors are now aware of their mistakes, they want to pass on this knowledge to us, what they could not or did not manage to do in their lifetimes. They are very happy to advise us because they are our roots. “Rod” is like a tree where we are the leaves. Keep your roots, live them within you, don’t separate yourself from the roots. You never know how the ancestors will be able to help you and your children. (Robert, 1963)

Samuel and Robert often use the impersonal category of ancestors, which can be expressed in ethnic terms. Both speak about “roots” in terms of concrete cultural traditions that are important for their circles. Samuel leads his circle primarily in a British Celtic tradition, while Robert is oriented towards Slavic heritage, although in the early stages of his practice he was fascinated by Native American traditions. His interest in local traditions was prompted by a vision experienced during an initiation ritual:⁵

⁵ FSS courses are organised hierarchically, beginning with a basic seminar and culminating in a three-years shamanic training programme. Upon successful completion, participants undergo an initiation and receive a certificate of completion that gives them the right to teach core shamanism (Foundation for Shamanic Studies, n.d.b). At present, Robert is the only active FSS lecturer in Slovakia. Thus, his emphasis on this vision during initiation indicates the importance of Slavic ancestors for the formation of shamanic circles in Slovakia.

During initiation, you pick up a small stone and you shuffle. And ... the song came to me that I was supposed to sing, so I sang it. So, I sang – give me the answer, give me the answer, give me the answer. And all of a sudden, I was just looking at the tree, and it had eyes, and it said to me: “Well, now calm down and look where you live. Why were you born here? This is the land of your ancestors. You don’t look there; you should. But look for what is hidden, what is rejected.” Well, that was the beginning of my search for my Slovak roots, for the culture, for the customs, for the things that were taken away from us and rewritten by other cultures. (Robert, 1963)

Ethnic categories, such as Slovaks, Slavs or Celts belong to the common manifestations of psychological essentialism. Essentialist thinking produces expectations that, despite superficial differences, members of ethnic groups share certain characteristics and behaviours; and that personal traits or an invisible essence are inherited (Bastian, Haslam, 2006; Wagner, 2024). In a spiritual context, however, this “ethnic” essence is associated with spiritual traditions. Samuel refers to Celtic shamanism as the main spiritual tradition in Bratislava, but he also mentions other traditions, interpreting them in essentialist terms and in connection with lines of descent:

For example, those from Cuba, there very strong ancestral energy is passing through those descent lines. Spirituality is very alive there, so the cult of ancestors and folk magic is very deeply ingrained in everyday life ... The Slovaks have a very good history, and also mysticism from fairy tales and folk beliefs. They are very good at magic or sorcery, but here people are spoiled by Christianity ... Yet there are many amazing healers here. It’s very similar to Russian female healers. I also see a great similarity with Bulgarians, I studied with a witch in Bulgaria, and I must say that these things are very similar. (Samuel, 1991)

It should be noted that both Samuel and Robert also interpret their own spiritual abilities in essentialist terms, as an innate gift allowing them to communicate with the Otherworld more effectively than others. They describe this capacity as manifesting from childhood – both considered themselves different from other children, as they could behave strangely and could have visions. Later, they perceived their special abilities differently. While Robert began to understand his gift only in adulthood, Samuel interprets it in relation to his mother’s spiritual talent, which he inherited and cultivated, also under the influence of the “Gypsy magic” practiced by his paternal relatives (see Bužeková, 2024; 2025).

Lena (born in 1974) attends events organised by Samuel’s circle, but she is also involved in the Slavic neo-pagan movement and is inclined towards Slavic spiritual heritage:

Slavs lived in harmony with nature and spirituality. Even according to the history of everything, and Samuel doesn’t like it when I tell him this, but basically all of Wicca has Slavic foundations. Well, he doesn’t like it very

much, but it's true because Slavs really lived all the way across Europe even as far as England. It's even claimed that King Arthur was a Slav ... I'm more drawn to the Slavic tradition because it's my roots, so I'm literally drawn to them. (Lena, 1974)

Participants in the spiritual meetings led by Robert and Samuel, however, mostly apply the notion of ancestors to their family members. Their interpretations are diverse and display elements of teachings absorbed during various spiritual meetings. All my interlocutors associated the expression *rodové linie* with family constellation practices, and most of them had attended such therapy sessions at least once. Repeated attendance of these sessions does not mean that the problems they bring there are being resolved only with limited success – on the contrary, it manifests both their satisfaction and their growing interest in this practice. When they are relieved and find meaning in their experiences, they return with further problems to solve. Their accounts focus on concrete persons and concrete problems, with individual experiences playing a central role. For example, Ragnar (born in 1985) attends Robert's seminars as well as meetings of a men's circle – a group in which participants share their inner experiences.⁶ He says:

Descent issues, those from our families, which we've inherited by being born into that family, in my opinion, are a very big factor. Ancestors have a very great influence. And I personally think that what my ancestors experienced has been embedded in me. I know people who, for example, have a great, very paralysing fear of going to sleep in the woods. One person, in particular, found out that his great-great-grandmother died in the woods. She was practically knocked over by a tree and she died there, and she was seven or eight months pregnant. And it's just extremely difficult for him to go to the woods. And nothing bad has happened to him before. But I think these things are being healed in these circles because people talk about them, they recognise them. (Ragnar, 1985)

The idea of personal traits that are inherited through an underlying essence corresponds to one component of psychological essentialism, which is called innate potential. It produces the assumption that essences are inherited and determined at birth (Neufeld, 2022). Importantly, in my interlocutors' accounts, this inherited essence is a form of spiritual energy that pervades the entire universe.

LINES OF DESCENT AND SPIRITUAL ENERGY

My interlocutors mostly conceptualise lines of descent as interconnections between generations through concrete individuals. In this regard, it is important to note that perceptions

⁶ For more on this type of meeting, which has recently gained popularity, see, for example Luz, 2024.

of the individual are always conditioned by the concept of personhood existing in a given cultural context; and in spiritual milieux, personhood is inseparable from the notion of energy. For example, Dick Houtman and Paul Tromp (2021: 55) consider several logically interrelated ideas that are central to the spiritual worldviews in Europe, including the belief that the entire universe originates from one universal spiritual energy that permeates all life, and that every person has a higher spiritual “self” that can be awakened and enlightened because the divine does not reside outside, but within every person. Houtman and Aupers argue that 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)

In the context of Central Europe, energy as a key concept of alternative spiritual currents was discussed by Helena Dyndová (2025) and Zuzana Kostíćová (2023; 2025).

This idea is present in all my interlocutors’ accounts. From the Wiccan point of view, universal energy is supposed to pervade all people, both the living and the dead, and is seen as a channel connecting them. Energy or force is conceptualised in terms of natural magic. As Samuel says:

Magic or witchcraft is the movement of natural forces in order to bring about the necessary change. Energy is present in all things – in us, in plants, in stones, in colours, in sounds and movements. (Samuel, 1991)

To communicate with the dead through energy, people use various practices, in which ASC plays an important role. During a seminar on communication with the dead, Samuel was teaching participants techniques such as visualisation – intended to convey the essence of ancestral spirits – and automatic writing, through which deceased family members were supposed to convey their messages to the living. In addition, participants were also taught “modern pagan practices” that do not require ASC such as placing crystals and flowers on ancestral graves, using candles from the cemetery in cases of haunting, or burning candles during mourning periods to help the dead become ancestors. At the end of the seminar, participants received a gift – a bell that could be used to summon ancestors when needed. Samuel encouraged everyone to create ancestral altars at home, displaying photographs and objects that belonged to deceased family members.

In the context of neo-shamanism, ancestors constitute a central theme in two FSS seminars – “Death and dying from the perspective of shamanism” and “Visionary dance”. The first one focuses on the interaction between the living and the dead, especially ancestors, and on how shamans can help the souls of the deceased get to the “other side”, that is, become ancestors. The related shamanic journeys to the Otherworld always involve ASC, typically induced by drumming, and are explained in terms of spiritual energy. In the second seminar, participants learn how to perform a special dance derived from

ancestral traditions, through which ancestors can convey their message and help their descendants change unwanted situations. Again, the dance involves ASC, understood in terms of energy. As Robert describes it:

And they [ancestors] actually come. They give you information through the dance, so they tell you what to do or what you should, what you should quit or what's burdensome for you. They have a message for you that you should be receiving through that dance, through that energy from the dance. (Robert, 1963)

Practitioners who do not occupy leading positions apply the general notion of ancestors to concrete family members. Energy and ASC play a central role in their accounts of lineage and inherited personal traits. This aspect reflects another component of essentialist thinking – intrinsicity, the idea that essences are intrinsic and not socially acquired (Neufeld, 2022). Although, in a spiritual context, such intrinsic essence is understood as a universal form of energy, people's diverse stories demonstrate that their interpretations are linked to their lives and concrete circumstances. Unlike the generalised notions of energy and ancestors found in leaders' accounts, other practitioners provided "personalised" depictions of how energy works through descent lines.

For example, Iveta (born in 1983) is a birth doula. She does not attend any spiritual meetings. She comes from a Christian family and received a religious education. However, she is not a believer and as an adult she became deeply interested in spiritual teachings. Her interest emerged from her experiences of giving birth to her three children, which also led her to pursue work as a doula. In her worldview, the concept of reincarnation and the notion of the soul as a form of energy are prominent:

I think I gained inner strength and a mission with each birth. I grew so much internally through these births, and it occurred to me that maybe I could offer something to other women, that I can pass something on to them ... I always told my children that their souls had come. They were angels before, and they came as souls into my belly and connected with my body. It is a big topic for me. I tell my children that when someone dies, they become an angel again, that they come back again. Since I am not a believer, I struggled for a long time with how to grasp the whole thing. Because I don't pray to anyone, I don't believe that God exists, but I imagine that there is something out there, let's call it angelic management ... These souls simply come into the world with a task, a mission, something they are supposed to leave behind and accomplish. And when their time is up, they leave. Since I don't have a concept of God and have never delved deeply into the stories of the Bible, I probably had to create something as a child or as a teenager that I could grasp. And even now, I still think about many things, but I am so clear in my mind that something exists up there. We are here for a reason, and life exists even before birth, and I also believe in reincarnation. (Iveta, 1983)

Regarding descent lines, Iveta says:

In my opinion, it also plays a role in childbirth ... when women give birth very similarly, for example, a mother gives birth in the same way as the grandmother. It runs like a red thread connecting these similar births, and women don't know why. When something is left unhealed and they're carrying some weight from previous generations, it has an impact on a woman's life. I especially see that female line. I mean, I see a lot of things that are in me so subconsciously, from that feminine lineage of mine. When I saw that [on a training course for doulas], I just cried. As if I had things that were not healed, that I hadn't settled something and it was stretching all the way back to me in that family line of mine ... I see it as energy. I think something stays in the body on an energy level. I believe, for example, that those female diseases in chakra places recur a lot, so something sticks there. When I talk about that feminine line of mine, I mean that those women experienced something bad in the past, wars, for instance, and that energy is still there. (Iveta, 1983)

Ela (born in 1984) practices magic/witchcraft and attends Samuel's school of magic and seminars. She is also interested in Eastern spiritual teachings and leads her own course on spiritual mandalas. She perceives her deceased mother and two grandmothers as her "three closest ones", who teach her and advise her through visions. Her mother had schizophrenia during her lifetime and used to attack her daughter, but in Ela's visions, she is completely different. However, this pattern of behaviour seems to have been replicated in Ela's own daughter, who used to attack Ela without any reason. Ela explains this as follows:

I was doing automatic writing at the seminar, and there I contacted her [Ela's mother] and asked her for a message. I wrote it [her mother's message] and then my daughter read it. She cried and she said that those words touched her. So sometimes we recognise that transmission there, that fragment of a soul, or just a transference of energy across the family line. Because I feel like my daughter is a fragment of my mother ... It's not a complete reincarnation, but some of my mum's stuff just got transferred in there to communicate something and especially to break that family burden, the pattern of the mother and daughter hating each other, which has been passed down from my mother's side for several, several generations, so there's great animosity between mothers and daughters. ... I saw how my aunt treated my grandmother, and there the hatred was very great. Very cruel. The same way my aunt treated her daughter. There's an awful lot of hatred. ... Four years ago, I told my daughter that either we break it, or we do exactly the same. Well, she, by also having some skills, she said that we had to redo it. She wanted to fix it. We have tried and I hope that we can break it with my daughter. (Ela, 1984)

Thus, the universal energy in my interlocutors' accounts takes many forms – negative and positive, gendered, or ethnic. Yet all those forms of energy share a very important aspect – a moral dimension.

SPIRITUAL ENERGY AND MORAL ESSENTIALISM

People's stories reflect the idea that personal traits, types of behaviour, illnesses or other problems are transmitted within families through energy, due to moral issues in the lives of the deceased family members. For example, Teresa (born in 1961), who has recently begun practicing shamanism, communicates with her deceased family members every day through spiritual energy. In her visions of the Otherworld and her ancestors, she is often given a specific task related to her family – she must clean dirty pots. Each pot represents a family member, and the dirt symbolises either a moral issue requiring resolution or a curse that must be removed – a very good illustration of Mary Douglas' concept of dirt as a universal moral symbol (Douglas, 1966). Teresa sees herself as a “family cleaner” – this is her specific role in her family:

They [ancestors] give me pots to clean the “rod”. And I'm cleaning these pots, I'm still cleaning pots, I'm like in a canteen. And when that's done, when a pot is beautiful, clean, stainless steel, it's wrapped in foil and placed on the shelf ... I've been cleaning my family a lot, especially since my mum had some curses. Well, and then something from dad ... And they tell me specifically who I must cleanse. I must forgive them by feeling all the sadness, all the anger that they caused. (Teresa, 1961)

The idea of “moral inheritance” points to a specific form of essentialist thinking. Recent studies on essentialism have demonstrated that, in addition to previously examined domains such as ethnicity or gender, there is also a human tendency to view moral characteristics in essentialist terms; this tendency is supported by both cognitive development and social learning (Heiphetz, 2020). In the spiritual context, energy as a unifying essence of all human beings is principally conceived in moral terms because personal spiritual development should not only improve individual lives but must also contribute to the well-being of other people and society. My interlocutors thus spoke about individual responsibility in settling problems that were transmitted within the family from generation to generation.

For example, Kristina (born in 1963) regularly attends family constellation sessions but does not participate in other spiritual meetings. She is an ardent reader of spiritual literature and is deeply influenced by Buddhism and Confucianism. Her vision of previous generations is as follows:

“Rodové línie”, that's me and what's behind me. It's my mother, behind me is my grandmother, great-grandmother, and also my father ... That means

that everything that was in the family line comes together in me. When I turn around, I see an infinite pyramid with me at the top, and that's a tremendous strength and a tremendous support. For me, it's an opportunity to lean on the fact that this is how I must live, based on experience and responsibility. (Kristina, 1963)

Mira (born in 1973) attends some of Robert's seminars, but also other events, such as courses on family constellations, holotropic breathwork, and art therapy.⁷ She also regularly travels to Columbia to participate in ayahuasca sessions with indigenous shamans. These journeys have profoundly influenced her worldview and, in particular her perception of ancestors, as she has seen their importance for Native Indians. She explains:

I hadn't thought about my ancestors for a long time, and I started to think about how it relates to me when I saw this connection between ancestors, their descendants, and nature. It brought me to the constellations. I saw a big connection with everything there. I guess people don't think about that anymore – why a parent acted the way they did, why a grandparent had it the way they had it, how it affected them. And these constellations open it up quite a bit. Because there's probably a lot that can be worked out there too, I'm a big believer in pulling those lines. That's for sure. People really should do deeper work on themselves to figure out the causes of problems. Whether they're caused by ancestors, or by themselves. I believe in karma and that when a lineage is burdened with something, it continues until it stops. But I do believe that any person, when they focus on it, can cut through it when they work on it. And I also believe that when it is not fixed, it continues. (Mira, 1973)

All of these accounts emphasise personal responsibility for problems inherited from ancestors. This moral dimension is linked to teleological thinking, as lineage is seen as a purpose-driven force. Kristina's account is a very good illustration of this idea: a person is conceived as the “top of the pyramid” of family members, and the purpose of lineage is personal development:

They [ancestors] lived in that time; they lived based on what they had and created. And they did the best they could in that time, in that moment. If they had known differently, they would have acted differently. For example, in the lives that were before me, somebody was murdered. So that victim's energy is passed down, and I can live that victim's energy today, or vice versa, someone was a murderer, and I live that murderer's energy today.

⁷ Holotropic breathwork is a therapeutic technique developed by Stanislav Grof that uses controlled, rapid breathing and evocative music to induce altered states of consciousness. It aims to facilitate emotional healing, personal growth and self-awareness by accessing and processing unconscious material (Grof, 1988). Art therapy courses are based on the ideas of Carl Gustav Jung referring to active imagination (Swan-Foster, 2020).

And we need to acknowledge both this and that. Without them, we would not be here. We are living what they dreamed and what they created for us, and we can and shall improve our own lives and the lives of other people. (Kristina, 1963)

Such an understanding of the moral transgressions of ancestors is not universal: as empirical research has shown, patterns of moral judgment are shaped by culturally transmitted concepts (McNamara et al., 2018). In relation to the general category of the dead, they typically include the idea that transgressions of moral rules lead to forms of negotiation between the living and the dead, aimed at restoring moral order (e.g. Mencej, 2024; 2025). In the context of contemporary spirituality, moral judgements are influenced by the idea of individual spiritual development, which is supposed to contribute to the moral development of the universe.

The specific notion of self-spirituality is reflected in the emphasis on individual responsibility for one's actions. However, my interlocutors also stress the connection with ancestors and the importance of moral messages received from them. Thus, the concept of personhood here is both individualistic and collective, as the individual is seen as part of a "family tree" or a "pyramid" in which all generations are interconnected. This connection is not merely biological – as is the case in traditional kinship-based communities – it is a connection through spiritual energy that conducts moral issues.

CONCLUSION

In my interlocutors' accounts, lines of descent are linked to interactions with deceased family members through the notion of spiritual energy, in a way that is comparable to the connection between ancestors and a vital force in traditional societies. However, this connection is conceptualised differently. In small traditional communities studied by ethnographers, kinship was an essential part of social organisation; cultural ideas and practices related to ancestors asserted the legitimacy and continuity of descent groups, ensuring that descent lines persisted and that the social order was maintained. For my interlocutors, who are engaged in spiritual practices in a contemporary urban environment, interaction with ancestors fulfils the same general function as in traditional societies: it is supposed to maintain order through spiritual energy. This order, however, is not understood in terms of a person's position in the social structure defined by kinship, but rather in terms of their function in the universe where this person can occupy various positions. Thus, individual moral behaviour is crucial: messages from ancestors help descendants to correct their actions and to develop inner or spiritual abilities that contribute to the positive development of the world. Within this framework, lines of descent appear as conduits of certain types of behaviour that are transmitted from generation to generation. People who become aware of these aspects of descent lines are supposed either to interrupt or reinforce them. Remarkably, they can be described not only in terms of family traits but also as forms of spiritual inheritance.

In the context of contemporary spirituality, all persons – both the living and the dead – are understood to share the same essence: a universal spiritual energy. In terms of essentialism, this is the essence of “the self” that determines people’s behaviour. In my interlocutors’ accounts, this energy is “fragmented”: it can be expressed in many forms corresponding to positive and negative family traits, patterns of behaviour, and individual life trajectories. To conclude, the concept of lines of descent within alternative spirituality manifests an impact of ancestors on the lives of their descendants through the experience of spiritual energy, which causes concrete forms of behaviour determined by moral issues.

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STATEMENT ON RESEARCH DATA MANAGEMENT

The article is based on research data stored in the author’s personal archive, which will be deposited later this year in the Social Science Data Archives (ADP – Arhiv družboslovnih podatkov; <https://www.adp.fdv.uni-lj.si/en/>), where it will be accessible, to a limited extent, for scientific and research purposes only.

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RODOVNE LINIJE V ALTERNATIVNI DUHOVNOSTI: DOŽIVLJANJE DELOVANJA PREDNIKOV PREK DUHOVNE ENERGIJE

Antropološke študije so pokazale, da se je v tradicionalnih družbah delovanje prednikov kazalo skozi njihov trajni vpliv ali aktivno prisotnost v življenju živih, doseženo z različnimi kulturnimi praksami. V tem kontekstu imajo pomembno vlogo rodovne linije kot družbeno priznane genealoške povezave med predniki in potomci. Rod ni razumljen zgolj kot biološko poreklo, temveč kot prenos duhovnega bistva, življenjske sile ali moči prednikov, številne povezane kulturne prakse pa temeljijo na spremenjenih stanjih zavesti. Danes so se predniki kot

posebna kategorija mrtvih pojavili tudi v okviru alternativnih duhovnih gibanj, zlasti v neopoganstvu, ki si prizadeva oživiti religije prednikov, pa tudi v urbanem šamanizmu, ki črpa iz različnih tradicij, pri čemer poudarja prednike kot nosilce svetega ali duhovnega znanja. V teh duhovnih miljeih ima pomembno vlogo tudi povezava med pojmom duhovne energije in spremenjenimi stanji zavesti v individualnih in kolektivnih praksah.

V tem prispevku predstavljam rezultate etnografske raziskave, izvedene v Bratislavi, glavnem mestu Slovaške, med ljudmi, ki sledijo različnim duhovnim idejam in praksam, zlasti urbanemu šamanizmu in Wicci – naravno usmerjenemu neopoganskemu gibanju. Trdim, da na izkušnje ljudi glede delovanja prednikov vplivajo konkretna kulturna okolja, saj je njihova interpretacija odvisna od pojmovanja osebnosti oziroma sebstva, ki je kulturno specifično.

Posebno pojmovanje duhovnosti sebstva, značilno za alternativne duhovne tokove, odraža individualizem, prevladujoč v zahodnih družbah. V pripovedih mojih sogovornikov se to kaže v moralnem poudarku na individualni odgovornosti za lastna dejanja. Vendar pa sogovorniki poudarjajo tudi povezanost s predniki in pomen moralnih sporočil, prejetih od njih. Nastajajoče pojmovanje osebnosti je tako hkrati individualistično in kolektivno, pri čemer je posameznik razumljen kot del medsebojno povezane družine, ki obsega več generacij.

Pripovedi svojih sogovornikov interpretiram s pomočjo teorij, ki upoštevajo univerzalne lastnosti človeškega uma ter kulturno raznolikost in individualne izkušnje, pri čemer izhajam iz kognitivne teorije religije Pascala Boyerja (2001) in njene nadgradnje Emme Cohen in Justina Barretta (2011), ki poudarja osebnost kot osrednji element intuitivnega razmišljanja o človeškem delovanju. S tega vidika ideja, da se duhovna energija prenaša skozi rodovne linije, izhaja iz več prepletenih kognitivnih mehanizmov, vključno z zaznavanjem dejavnikov, intuitivnim dualizmom, teleološkim mišljenjem in psihološkim esencializmom. V svoji interpretaciji bom posebno pozornost namenila esencializmu, razumljenemu kot težnja k predpostavki, da člani določene kategorije – vključno z biološkimi vrstami in družinami – posedujejo neko temeljno, nespremenljivo bistvo, ki določa njihovo identiteto in lastnosti.

V tem duhovnem kontekstu je energija kot združujoče bistvo vseh ljudi razumljena predvsem v moralnem smislu, saj naj bi osebni duhovni razvoj ne izboljševal le posameznikovega življenja, temveč tudi prispeval k blaginji drugih ljudi in družbe kot celote. Povezave med družinskimi člani v pripovedih mojih sogovornikov tako presegajo biološko poreklo: razumljene so kot povezave, posredovane z duhovno energijo, ki prenaša moralna vprašanja. Zgodbe ljudi se nanašajo na idejo, da se osebnostne lastnosti, vzorci vedenja, bolezni ali druge težave dedujejo prek takšne energije zaradi moralnih vprašanj v življenju pokojnih družinskih članov. Ta ideja »moralnega dedovanja« kaže na specifično obliko esencialističnega mišljenja – moralni esencializem.

Skleпам, da ima za moje sogovornike, ki se ukvarjajo z duhovnimi praksami v sodobnem urbanem okolju, interakcija s predniki enako splošno funkcijo kot v

tradicionalnih družbah: vzdrževanje reda prek duhovne energije. Vendar ta red ni razumljen v smislu posameznikovega položaja v družbeni strukturi, določeni s sorodstvom, temveč v smislu posameznikove funkcije v vesolju, kjer lahko zaseda različne položaje. Individualno moralno vedenje je zato ključno: sporočila prednikov pomagajo potomcem popravljati svoja dejanja ter razvijati notranje ali duhovne sposobnosti, ki prispevajo k pozitivnemu razvoju sveta. V tem okviru rodovne linije delujejo kot kanali, po katerih se določeni vzorci vedenja prenašajo iz generacije v generacijo, ljudje, ki se teh vidikov rodovnih linij zavedo, pa naj bi jih bodisi prekinili bodisi okrepili. Tako pojem rodovnih linij v alternativni duhovnosti odraža vpliv prednikov na življenje njihovih potomcev skozi izkušnjo duhovne energije, ki se kaže v konkretnih oblikah vedenja, določenih z moralnimi vprašanji.

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Why People Go to Mediums: Motivations and Embodied Experience among Clients of the Three-Legged Stool Practice in Hungary

Emese Ilyefalvi

This article examines contemporary mediumship in Hungary through ethnographic research among practitioners of a three-legged stool technique and their clients. Drawing on interviews, participant observation and analysis of séance practices, the study explores why people seek contact with the dead and how these encounters generate experiential certainty, address crises and produce new forms of meaning. By situating the Hungarian material within broader European and global contexts, the article shows how individualised, experience-centred mediumship operates within today's spiritual and consumer landscapes.

KEYWORDS: mediumship, Hungary, contemporary spirituality, afterlife, embodied experience, commodification of spirituality, object-mediated writing

Prispevek obravnava sodobno medijstvo na Madžarskem na podlagi etnografske raziskave med izvajalci tehnike trinožnega stolčka in njihovimi klienti. Na osnovi intervjujev, opazovanja z udeležbo in analize seans preučuje razloge za iskanje stika z mrtvimi ter načine, kako tovrstne izkušnje vzpostavljajo občutek gotovosti, pomagajo pri soočanju z življenjskimi krizami in prispevajo k oblikovanju novih pomenov. Z umestitvijo madžarskega gradiva v širši evropski in globalni kontekst članek pokaže, kako individualizirane oblike medijstva, osredinjene na osebno izkušnjo, delujejo v sodobnem duhovnem in potrošniškem okolju.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: medijstvo, Madžarska, sodobna duhovnost, posmrtno življenje, utelešena izkušnja, komodifikacija duhovnosti, pisanje s pomočjo predmetov

INTRODUCTION: RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND CONTEXT

Practices of communicating with the dead are present in a wide range of contemporary alternative spiritual contexts, including various forms of mediumship that emphasise personal experience and interaction with deceased persons (Steffen, 2013; Kalvig, 2016). In Hungary, practices of communicating with the dead have important historical antecedents. Classical ethnographic descriptions of Hungarian seers, as well as interpretations of the figure of the seer in a broader European context, had become relatively well established by the second half of the twentieth century (Pócs, 1990; 2002). The history of Hungarian spiritualism likewise points to earlier transnational influences and mediumistic traditions (Oppenheim, 1985; Gutierrez, 2015; Benedek, 2024). By contrast, contemporary forms of seeing the dead and mediumistic practice – particularly those embedded in individualised settings and within the broader milieu of contemporary spirituality – have not yet been

the subject of comprehensive empirical research in Hungary. In Hungarian scholarship, these phenomena tend to appear only in marginal remarks, and systematic ethnographic or anthropological accounts remain lacking.

International scholarship has repeatedly noted similar gaps: research on contemporary mediumship and practices of communicating with the dead is often fragmented, case-based and overshadowed by historical or doctrinal approaches. At the same time, recent decades have seen the publication of several in-depth, monograph-length studies with an anthropological focus (Steffen, 2011; 2013; 2016; Kalvig, 2016; Tomlinson, 2024). The present study seeks to engage with these international efforts by offering an ethnographic analysis of contemporary mediumistic practice in Hungary.

Contemporary mediumistic practice in Hungary encompasses a range of techniques and forms of mediation, including clairvoyance, trance communication, platform mediumship and different variants of automatic or object-mediated writing. Rather than attempting a comprehensive overview, this article focuses on one specific and little-documented technique, the so-called three-legged stool method. This case is selected for its distinct material form of mediation, its emphasis on interaction and participation, and its circulation among a small number of contemporary practitioners, some of whom were originally introduced to the technique by Antal Bujka (Bujka, Hegedűs, 2000). By concentrating on this particular technique, the study aims to provide a detailed ethnographic account that can also contribute to broader discussions of contemporary mediumship.

The article draws on ethnographic fieldwork conducted among practitioners of the three-legged stool technique and their clients in Hungary. Its primary aim is to examine the contexts and motivations that lead people to consult mediums, as well as the experiential and relational dimensions of these encounters. Particular attention is given to how mediumistic communication produces forms of experiential certainty, addresses situations of crisis, and sustains ongoing relationships between the living and the dead.

The article proceeds by first introducing Antal Bujka and his association with the three-legged stool technique, followed by an outline of the methodological approach and fieldwork context. It then presents the technique in greater detail and situates it within its broader historical and comparative context. The subsequent sections analyse the motivations and situations in which clients turn to mediums, before turning to the sensory and embodied dimensions of the encounter. Finally, the article situates these practices within the wider context of contemporary spirituality and experience-oriented forms of consumption.

ANTAL BUJKA AND YMOLA

In 2000, a small book titled *Ymola* was published in Hungary. Its subtitle, *The True Stories of a Medium*, presents the account of how Antal Bujka became a medium (in 1993), as well as the events of the following seven years, including anonymised cases involving his clients.¹ Antal Bujka, who came from a family of musicians in Újpest and

¹ The book was compiled with the assistance of Piroska Hegedűs, who also wrote the preface (Bujka, Hegedűs, 2000).

later pursued a career in commerce after leaving the field of music, was one of Budapest's well-known mediums for more than thirty years, until his death in 2023.² On 14 December 1993, Bujka encountered a middle-aged woman from Romania named Ymola – hence the book's title – from whom he received the intermediary object, a small “mediumistic stool”. According to the book, the transmission of this knowledge occurred through an unexpected turn of events. While selling goods at a market, Bujka helped Ymola and her companion by offering them space to sell their merchandise. By the evening, they had sold almost all their goods. In return for this good deed, Ymola invited Bujka to their home, where she told him that he was a chosen person endowed with exceptionally strong spiritual energies. Bujka, curious but initially sceptical, was eventually persuaded to try the stool. In order to convince him, they attempted to summon Bujka's deceased father through it. The conversation with his late father had a profound impact on him, and he accepted the stool. By the next day, however, Ymola had disappeared. In worldly, earthly reality they never met again, yet over time – through the stool – Bujka was able to consult with her as a spiritual guide.

The book also includes stories illustrating the kinds of issues clients brought to Bujka in the 1990s and the forms of communication that unfolded through the three-legged stool. These narratives – many of which remain common today – range from messages of reassurance from the dead, to healing attempts, expressions of guilt over neglected graves, assistance in locating lost objects, references to rebirth or past lives, and warnings about impending dangers. Each story is followed by brief comments from the medium, and the book concludes with a diagram outlining the soul's journey after death. Today, *Ymola* can only be obtained from antiquarian bookshops, often at relatively high prices. During my research on mediumship in Hungary, ongoing since 2024, several mediums have referred to the book, including practitioners who work with different techniques and who did not personally know Bujka. Moreover, some mediums still practicing today were originally initiated into mediumship by Bujka himself. Over the course of his thirty-year career, he selected several individuals from among his clients to whom he transmitted his knowledge, usually through courses he organised and conducted either individually or in very small groups.

RESEARCH METHODS AND FIELDWORK

Over the past two years of ethnographic fieldwork, I became acquainted with four mediums who continue to practice mediumship and were originally initiated by Bujka. Although all of them learned from him, they have no personal relationships with one another; at most, they became aware online that others also continue to practice the Bujka technique, or they occasionally hear about one another's activities through clients who go from

² Biographical information is drawn from Balla, 2009. From the early 2000s onward, Antal Bujka appeared repeatedly in the popular media and also led séances on television programmes, including sessions involving well-known public figures and the invocation of the spirit of the Hungarian celebrity singer Jimmy Zámbó. For further examples, see his YouTube channel launched in 2021: <https://www.youtube.com/@lelekpillanatok695>.

one specialist to another. Among these four “students”, there is even one who does not consider themselves a true disciple, despite having received their first stool from Bujka.

Among the four mediums, three practice mediumship as their primary occupation, while one uses the knowledge acquired from Bujka only for personal purposes and does not pursue it professionally. One of the four is male and three are female, all of them in their forties. One lives and practices in Budapest, another in a smaller town near the capital, one lives abroad in Italy, and the fourth in a small town in the Hungarian-inhabited regions of Slovakia.

Beyond the specialists, I conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with thirty interlocutors who had tried this particular form of mediation at least once, and in some cases multiple times. I reached interlocutors primarily through online platforms, via calls posted on social media and through direct outreach. I was most successful in approaching those who had publicly shared accounts of their séance experiences on social media. Most of the interviews were conducted online, while a smaller number took place in person. This was partly due to the absence of geographical constraints in the research and partly because even interlocutors living nearby generally preferred to meet online, at least for the first encounter.

The interlocutors came from different regions of Hungary, as well as from Hungarian communities beyond its borders and, in a few cases, from further abroad. Their places of residence included the capital, small towns and villages. The sample displayed considerable diversity in terms of age, educational background and religious–spiritual self-identification. Most interlocutors were between thirty and sixty years old and had secondary education or less, although several had completed higher education. Religious orientations ranged from affiliation with historical churches to more loosely defined or explicitly “spiritual” self-identifications.

Nearly all interlocutors were women;³ only one man participated in the study, whom I interviewed together with his partner in connection with the loss of their child. The main characteristics of the sample are summarised in Table 1.

Characteristic	Distribution
Region of residence	Hungary (17); Hungarian communities beyond its borders (10); abroad (3)
Type of settlement	Capital city (8); small towns (12); villages (7); large cities abroad (3)
Education	Higher education (7); secondary school or less (23)
Age group	20s (1); 30s (7); 40s (11); 50s (9); 60s (2)
Religious–spiritual identification	Catholic (5); Protestant (3); loosely affiliated with historical churches/spiritual (9); spiritual (13)
Gender	Women (29); men (1)

Table 1: Overview of the interlocutors (N = 30)

³ The strong female predominance among participants has been widely noted in studies of alternative spirituality (Heelas, Woodhead, 2005: 97–106); for observations specifically concerning mediumship, see, for example, Kalvig, 2016 and Steffen, 2011, 2013, 2016.

As part of the research, I also observed mediumship-related groups on social media and followed clients' discussions within these spaces; however, the present article is based primarily on the interview corpus. To ensure anonymity, all interlocutors were assigned pseudonyms, and smaller settlements are not identified by name. In addition to the interviews, I participated in two séances in 2025 with two different mediums in order to gain first-hand experience of the practice.

THE THREE-LEGGED STOOL TECHNIQUE IN CONTEXT

How does this technique work in practice? Based on my own experience and interview accounts, the process can be summarised as follows. The three-legged stool resembles a small wooden seat; however, its third leg is in fact a small pencil. A large sheet of white paper (approximately A2 size) is fixed to a table. The medium then invokes, or calls upon, the soul with whom the clients wish to communicate. For this type of séance, it is considered important that at least two clients be present – people who knew the deceased well – because this is believed to generate stronger energy. In exceptional cases, attendance alone is possible, mainly for those already experienced with séances and regarded as possessing a higher “vibrational level”. According to participants' understandings, the dead use the energies of the living in order to convey their messages. After contact has been established, the séance begins with a series of identification questions, usually led by the medium, who acts as the primary questioner in this initial phase. If the summoned soul is strong enough, the three-legged stool begins to move, writing or drawing on the sheet of white paper, through which it is able to communicate with the relatives. If the soul is weaker, it is asked to respond only to yes–no questions by circling the appropriate answer or by giving other simple signals. Gradually, and with the encouragement of the medium, the clients also begin to participate in asking identification questions. The medium urges them to ask questions whose answers could not possibly be known by anyone other than themselves and the summoned soul. Once the identification phase is complete and the participants are fully convinced that they are indeed communicating with the intended soul, the actual conversation can begin. At this stage, the clients take on the main role, while the medium steps somewhat into the background, assisting primarily by helping to simplify or reformulate questions if they are too complex, and by facilitating the overall interaction. Even with the medium's guidance, the emphasis at this stage lies on the direct communication between the clients and the soul (or souls) of the deceased. At the end of the séance, the farewell is again led by the medium in order to close the connection safely. After the session, the family members may take the sheet of paper home with them.

The technique described above does not appear in contemporary anthropological and ethnographic literature on mediumship in Western European and Anglo-American contexts, although this absence may reflect gaps in documentation rather than the absence of comparable practices. While the book *Ymola* provides only a brief remark on the origin of the stool – stating merely that it is “ancient” – the small, three-legged, stool-like

writing device described above is not historically unfamiliar. Rather, it bears a structural resemblance to object-mediated writing techniques associated with nineteenth-century Spiritualism (Oppenheim, 1985; Gutierrez, 2015; etc.). The *planchette*, which appeared in Spiritualist circles in France in the mid-nineteenth century, was a small instrument typically shaped like a drop or a heart, equipped with two small wheels and a writing pencil functioning as a third “leg”. During the second half of the nineteenth century, the planchette became a mass-produced séance device – particularly in the United States – and eventually emerged as one of the iconic techniques of British and American physical Spiritualism.⁴ Planchettes and related writing devices gained popularity relatively quickly in Central Europe, including Hungary, during the nineteenth century.⁵ By the turn of the twentieth century, forms of spirit communication mediated through writing mediums without the use of such instruments had also become increasingly prominent. Their growing significance was closely associated with the emergence of Hungarian evangelical Spiritualism, which largely followed the French Kardecist tradition and placed particular emphasis on inspirational and automatic writing produced directly through the medium.

Kardecist evangelical Spiritualism embedded mediumistic communication within a religious–moral framework and placed the emphasis not on physical proof but on spiritual teaching, moral development and the personal suitability of the medium. By contrast, in British and American physical Spiritualism, spectacular and materially traceable phenomena connected to objects – including the production of writing through a device – became primary means of credibility and proof. In Hungarian practice, therefore, the writing medium did not appear as a backgrounded intermediary, but rather as a morally responsible person whose body and hand remained the central site of communication. The best-known writing mediums of the region – such as Adelma Vay or the mediums associated with the circle of Adolf Grünhut – did not use material mediating devices. Through automatic writing, they conveyed revelations via their own hands, while emphasising that the act did not arise from conscious intention but from spiritual guidance (Grünhut, 1921; Benedek, 2024: 130–140). Within this interpretive framework, writing was understood not as a technical trick or form of proof, but as a manifestation of the medium’s bodily–spiritual condition and moral credibility.

The differences between physical–experimental and evangelical Spiritualism were reflected not only in differing techniques and logics of credibility, but also in the social forms of mediumship. British and American physical Spiritualism was closely associated with public mediumistic performances, in which spectacular phenomena and demonstrations intended as proof unfolded before an audience. By contrast, the evangelical Spiritualism

⁴ See a contemporary depiction of one of the most famous Boston Planchettes: [https://iif.lib.harvard.edu/manifests/view/drs:5345808\\$103i](https://iif.lib.harvard.edu/manifests/view/drs:5345808$103i).

⁵ Contemporary newspaper and periodical literature provides abundant evidence of the dissemination and popularity of planchets and related writing devices in Hungary. In a retrospective account published in *Fővárosi Lapok* in December 1889, Baron Kálmán Jósika recalled the spiritualist milieu of approximately thirty five years earlier: “It is about thirty-five years since cabinetmakers in Hungary, and especially in Transylvania, were kept busy by orders for small tables that could be moved with one hand. There was hardly a modern household without such a little three-legged table and, among the members of the family, a medium suited to it” (author’s translation) (*Fővárosi Lapok*, 27 December 1889).

linked to the Kardecist tradition in Hungary was less conducive to such public appearances: mediumistic communication was interpreted primarily within a closed moral–religious framework, which contributed to the fact that mediums who performed in public were present in much smaller numbers in nineteenth-century Hungary.

A further difference concerns organisational forms. Although, by the end of the nineteenth century, Hungarian Spiritualists – similarly to those in several Western European countries – also operated in associations, these gradually became unviable over the course of the twentieth century, especially as a result of the political and ideological transformations following the Second World War, and eventually almost entirely disappeared. The period after the political transition did not bring any substantial revival either: Spiritualist communal forms still exist, but they have not been able to reorganise in any meaningful way (Benedek, 2024). As a result of these historical processes, contemporary mediumistic practice in Hungary takes place not in associative or communal forms, but predominantly within individualised practices.

In this respect, the situation of contemporary Hungarian mediums shows both differences from and similarities with Western European and Anglo-Saxon contexts. The most significant difference lies in the absence of an organisational background: in Hungary there are no “church-like” mediumistic congregations of the kind widespread in Western Europe and the Anglo-Saxon world, where such groups may also operate as officially registered religious communities. Such communities have recently been studied anthropologically by Anne Kalvig in Norway (2016), Vibeke Steffen in Denmark (2011; 2013; 2016), and Matt Tomlinson in Australia (2024). In these contexts, mediumistic practice is often connected to communal rituals, regular gatherings and institutional frameworks.

Contemporary Hungarian mediums typically work in individual practice. Although some also give public performances (“platform mediumship”), even before audiences of several hundred people, this form is better regarded as exceptional. Such public appearances resemble the practice of well-known American mediums such as Theresa Caputo or Tyler Henry (cf. Darghawth, 2013; White, 2019). Alongside touring mediums who hold large public events, however, the contemporary Hungarian field is characterised much more strongly by personal consultations involving two or three participants, which provide a more intimate, experience-centred framework for establishing contact with the dead – as in the case of the mediums working with the Antal Bujka technique that stands at the centre of this study.

Despite these differing organisational, institutional and technical forms – and despite the fact that comparable object-mediated writing techniques do not appear in contemporary Western European and Anglo-Saxon ethnographic research – the motivations of clients, the aims of establishing contact, and the content of the messages conveyed show significant similarities with Western European and Anglo-Saxon mediumistic practices. For this reason, Western European and Anglo-Saxon scholarship has provided an important point of departure for my analysis. At the same time, the Hungarian material demonstrates how contemporary mediumistic practices operating without institutional backing and in predominantly individualised forms may nevertheless be understood as part of the broader field of globalised spiritual phenomena.

CONTEXTS AND MOTIVATIONS

In this article, I focus on the contexts, life situations and motivations that lead people in contemporary Hungary to consult mediums. A close reading of the interviews reveals a range of underlying motivations. While diverse, these form several recurring patterns. The categories outlined below are not mutually exclusive and often overlap in practice. Moreover, they operate at different analytical levels: some reflect emic motivations articulated by participants, while others refer to experiential dimensions of the encounter or to broader analytical interpretations. The categories are therefore not meant as fixed or mutually exclusive, but as a way of highlighting recurring patterns in the material.

Based on the interviews and field experiences, the following recurring motivations and contexts can be identified: (1) communication with the dead, including the desire to confirm the existence of the afterlife and gain certainty about it; (2) the resolution of crises related to death, including unanswered questions and unresolved family conflicts; (3) seeking advice in relation to the everyday crises of the living, often connected to life management and decision-making; and (4) situations in which the deceased themselves are understood to be in crisis. In addition to these motivations, participants also emphasise the therapeutic and sensory qualities of the encounter itself (5), while the practice can further be interpreted within the experience-oriented logic of contemporary consumer culture (6).

1. Seeking Certainty about the Afterlife and Communication with the Dead

Based on the interviews, one of the most important motivations of clients is the desire to gain certainty about the existence of the afterlife and the possibility of communicating with the dead. This desire does not appear simply as a matter of belief, but rather as a search for existential certainty made accessible through personal experience. Turning to a medium often does not stem from a previously stable spiritual conviction; on the contrary, it frequently arises from questions, doubts and ambivalence. All of my interlocutors reported experiences that they attributed to the presence of a deceased relative. These experiences took different forms, including dreams as well as various sensory signs: moving objects, encounters with animals (for example butterflies or household pets), distinctive smells, light phenomena or unexplained bodily sensations. One of the main reasons for consulting a medium was to confirm the meaning of these experiences – to determine whether the signs perceived by clients truly originated from the deceased or might instead be related to grief, longing or coincidence.

In the case of the three-legged stool technique, writing itself constitutes a particularly important material form of certainty. The sheets of paper produced during the séance often function as keepsakes: participants preserve them and revisit them from time to time, showing them to relatives and friends, recounting which questions were asked and how the summoned deceased responded, and retelling the events of the séance. Moreover, several interlocutors reported that the handwriting produced through the small stool sometimes resembled that of the deceased, which further reinforced for them both the authenticity of the experience and the depth of the connection and communication. Among my interlocutors, there is even an example of a client who later had a fragment of

an answer written by her deceased mother during the séance tattooed on her body. In this sense, writing does not merely convey information; it becomes a lasting trace – material evidence invested with bodily and emotional significance.

Several interlocutors emphasised that they arrived at the séance with a distinctly sceptical attitude and did not believe that communication with the dead was possible. This observation corresponds closely with Matt Tomlinson's analyses of mediumistic communities in Australia. According to Tomlinson, doctrinal belief is rarely the primary element in mediumistic practice; rather, personal bodily and sensory experiences play a decisive role, often overriding previously held worldview positions (Tomlinson, 2024: 21). In this sense, the séance does not function as confirmation of an already existing belief but rather as an event that produces certainty, in which experience precedes and shapes belief. In her research in Denmark, Vibeke Steffen similarly argues that clients seek this kind of certainty because the interpretive frameworks offered by mediums provide reassurance for those who feel uncertain due to their own sensitivities or recurring experiences. Through a spiritual explanation, they are finally able to attribute coherent meaning to these experiences (Steffen, 2016).

The interviews also suggest that the desire to gain certainty about the existence of the afterlife is not limited to clients who do not practice religion. Interlocutors who regularly practised Christianity emphasised that, although the idea of eternal life had always been present in their faith, they still felt the need for "something more" than belief itself: a certainty grounded in personal experience.

Edina (45) and Gáspár (53), a deeply Catholic couple from Budapest who lost their young son, expressed this by saying that although they had always believed in the afterlife, "*we were looking for conviction beyond faith ... for certainty*" (Interlocutor EI043, female, 1980; Interlocutor EI044, male, 1972, 16.6.2025). For many participants, the mediumistic experience thus functions as a sensory complement to faith, transforming doctrinal teachings into personally grounded certainty. In this sense, consulting a medium becomes not merely a search for information about the dead, but a way of producing experiential certainty about the afterlife.

2. Resolving Unanswered Questions and Family Conflicts: Death as Crisis

The certainty experienced during the séance – the perception of signs and their validation – often provides reassuring answers to a fundamental question: whether the deceased relative is "well" and "in a good place". The event of death usually generates a complex crisis, raising many additional questions that often remain unresolved: why this person, why at that particular moment, why under those circumstances, and how one can continue living after such a loss. In many cases, these questions are accompanied by a sense of unfinished business between the living and the dead. Based on my ethnographic fieldwork, the desire to consult a medium appears particularly often after sudden, unexpected or traumatic deaths, such as the loss of young children, suicide, accidents, incurable illness or deaths occurring under unclear circumstances. This category also includes situations in which the circumstances of death remain uncertain – for example in cases of disappearance, suspected homicide or suspected medical negligence.

The interviews also indicate that even a natural death in old age can trigger a profound crisis, particularly when the farewell remained incomplete or when relatives experience strong feelings of guilt. Many interlocutors described situations in which they were unable to be present at the moment of death, or felt that they had failed to do something that can no longer be done. Clients therefore seek not only comfort but also some form of reassuring explanation: an interpretive framework within which missed or incomplete final encounters, or a death that appears senseless, can acquire meaning.

One characteristic form of such explanations is what Susan E. Kwilecki describes as a “soul contract theodicy” (Kwilecki, 2014), a concept she developed in her analysis of the narratives of parents who have lost children. According to this understanding, souls agree before birth – within an intermediate state of existence – to undertake future suffering, including even an early death, for the sake of spiritual development. Within this interpretive framework, the death of a child is not understood as an accident or injustice but as a learning opportunity that may serve the spiritual development of the parents, the balancing of the child’s karma, or the fulfilment of an unfinished spiritual “task”.

In my own fieldwork, parents who had lost a child constituted approximately 16% of my interlocutors (five interlocutors). In these cases, narratives that placed the loss within a karmic or transcendent order appeared particularly frequently – for example through interpretations such as “this is teaching us something”, “this was all that was written for him in this life”, or “he had to move on”. At the same time, the analysis of the material also suggests that the soul contract theodicy does not operate exclusively in interpretations of child death but also appears as an explanatory principle in other forms of death that are difficult to accept. In such cases, the specific content of the explanations may differ, but the underlying logic remains the same: death is interpreted not as an arbitrary event but as part of a spiritual path agreed upon in advance.

From this perspective, Kwilecki’s theory – although empirically grounded in the experiences of parents who have lost children – can be extended into a broader interpretive framework for other types of loss. In the cases examined in my research, the karmic explanatory principle fulfils a similar function: it resolves the experience of contingency and injustice, reduces feelings of personal responsibility, and allows death to be understood as part of a larger, meaningful order.

Antónia (43), from Budapest, first turned to a medium in her early twenties during a severe life crisis, after losing her first love to suicide. Following the tragedy, she experienced intense self-blame and a profound personal crisis, which – according to her own account – only the encounter with the medium helped to overcome. As she put it, “*there I received the strength to continue my life*” (Interlocutor EI041, female, 1982, 28.3.2025), along with the reassurance that she had not caused her partner’s death. Later in life, she experienced another loss: her mother died relatively young as a result of medical negligence in a hospital while Antónia was abroad. During the séance, her questions focused primarily on what had happened to her mother and why “this had to happen in this way”. She also asked whether this had been her mother’s final “exit point”. In contemporary alternative spiritual contexts, it is widely understood that a person may have multiple potential “exit points” from physical life; accordingly, a recurring question in séances is

whether a given death represents the final such moment or whether it might have been avoided. The answer she received initially did not bring comfort. It turned out that this had not been the final possible moment for her mother to leave this life. According to the message conveyed during the séance, however, her mother had nevertheless chosen this path because after her death she would be able to support her daughter more effectively. At first, Antónia found this explanation difficult to accept. Over time, however, a series of positive changes and events in her own life gradually convinced her of her mother's continued presence and support (Interlocutor EI041, female, 1982, 28.3.2025).

Antónia's case is not unique. During my fieldwork, this idea appeared repeatedly: that the meaning of death may be explained through the deceased person's role as a spiritual helper. For many participants this interpretation can be comforting, although it does not always lead to resolution. Kati (53), a kindergarten teacher living in a small village in the Dunajská Streda district (okres Dunajská Streda), for example, believed that her father's death might have served to "resolve" a family conflict, yet the tensions ultimately remained unresolved and continued to shape family relations (Interlocutor EI036, female, 1972, 19.3.2025).

I also regularly asked my interlocutors whether they believed in reincarnation or rebirth. Most responses were affirmative; however, it became clear that few held well-developed views on the matter. In several cases, the séance itself was the first occasion on which the possibility of reincarnation had arisen for them – particularly among those more closely affiliated with mainstream churches. Mediumistic conversations often provided not only answers but also interpretive frameworks for imagining the cycle of souls, understanding the meaning of karma, or making sense of statements such as "this had to happen in this way". During séances, questions frequently arise concerning the inevitability of death: whether the moment of death had been the deceased person's "final exit point" from this world, and whether things could have happened differently. When the response is that "this was what had been written" or "this was their karma", many relatives experience this as reassuring, since it alleviates feelings of personal responsibility. The question of reincarnation carries a similar significance: whether the deceased will be reborn, whether they might meet again, or even return to the same family.

These experiences suggest that the crisis brought about by the loss of a relative is one of the most important motivations for consulting a medium. In such cases, the mediumistic encounter typically takes place relatively soon after the death – within a few months or one or two years – and becomes an active part of the grieving process. According to Susan E. Kwilecki, mediumistic experiences enable mourners to reinterpret their worldview: the relationship is not severed but transformed, and death comes to be understood as a spiritual transition (Kwilecki, 2009: 121; 2011). In the international literature, the most common immediate motivations for consulting a medium are grief, the search for continuity in relationships, and the desire for certainty. Relatives do not merely wish to believe; they seek concrete answers to questions such as whether the deceased is "well", whether they "still love them", or whether they have "forgiven them" (Kalvig, 2016: 48–50; White, 2019: 90–91). In this respect, the material I collected among Hungarians closely follows these international patterns. Mediumship thus fulfils a dual function:

it provides emotional support and comfort while also offering an interpretive framework in which death can be understood not as an endpoint but as a transformed continuation of a relationship.

3. Seeking Advice and Guidance: The Living in Situations of Crisis

Once clients experience during mediumistic encounters that their relationship with the deceased does not end permanently but can continue in a new and ongoing form, they very often become regular clients. Most of my interlocutors were able to recount not just a single séance experience but several; those who had attended only once by the time of the interview usually said that they intended to return. In such cases, consulting a medium no longer appears solely as a response to a single crisis – more precisely, to the initial crisis of death – but becomes part of a longer-term strategy for coping with and navigating life. Vibeke Steffen's fieldwork in Denmark similarly shows that most mediumistic consultations are not linked to acute crises but rather address everyday uncertainties, decision-making dilemmas, and enduring life problems (Steffen, 2013: 192–194). To describe this phenomenon, Steffen introduces the concept of “deferred closure”, suggesting that séances often do not offer a final resolution but instead enable an ongoing, processual form of coping (Steffen, 2013: 200). In this sense, spiritual counselling does not close the relationship with the deceased but helps sustain it over time, while the continuing bond with the dead becomes a source of emotional security and guidance in decision-making.

The accounts of my interlocutors closely follow this pattern. Although many of them emphasise that they do not arrive with clearly formulated questions, specific concerns often emerge in the course of the séance itself, as the encounter develops into an ongoing conversation. As several interlocutors noted, “there will always be new questions”. Communication does not come to an end, and sharing doubts and uncertainties with the deceased is experienced as meaningful. In these encounters, the deceased are addressed as knowledgeable and supportive advisors. Mediums themselves encourage this approach, urging participants to ask questions freely because the deceased “know everything”. As a result, clients often seek guidance not only on matters related to grief but also on issues such as health, workplace problems or personal crises. The interviews included examples of consultations before divorce or before changing jobs, and requests for health-related advice were also common. Zsófi (34), a nurse living in a small Hungarian town in Slovakia, for example, once asked her deceased grandmother for what she jokingly called a “*heavenly CT scan*”. Through the mediation of the medium, the grandmother indeed indicated a problematic area, which was later confirmed during a medical examination (Interlocutor EI045, female, 1991, 17.6.2025).

The previously mentioned Antónia similarly reported that she regularly consulted a medium before making important decisions. According to her account, nearly every major step in her life was preceded by such a consultation. This was the case, for example, when she decided to move to Italy with her two-month-old child, leaving behind her previous life and relationships: “*I went to ask whether I was making the right decision, whether I should leave everything behind ... whether I should take this step*” (Interlocutor EI041, female, 1982, 28.3.2025).

The frequency of these return visits varies considerably. Some interlocutors said they would go every week if they could, while others consult a medium only every two, three or four months. In the case of parents who have lost a child, consultations often become a lasting – sometimes experienced as endless – part of the grieving process. Edina and Gáspár, for example, stated that they would never stop; they want to speak again and again with their deceased child (Interlocutor EI043, female, 1980; Interlocutor EI044, male, 1972, 16.6.2025). During my fieldwork, I encountered several cases in which someone had been visiting the same medium regularly for years – without exception, these were mothers who had lost a child. Other clients, however, consciously try to set limits and turn to a medium only when truly important questions arise. Zsófi, for example, believes that it is not appropriate to disturb the dead constantly with trivial matters; in her view, they should be consulted only in moments of crisis or when facing important decisions (Interlocutor EI045, female, 1991, 17.6.2025).

Closely related to requests for advice are questions about the future, which form part of a broader strategy for managing uncertainty. Although mediums often emphasise that the dead cannot be asked to predict the future and can offer only guidance – since people possess free will in earthly life – clients frequently seek answers about what lies ahead. Brigi (33), who lives in a small Hungarian-speaking town in Slovakia, for instance, consulted a medium primarily to ask her deceased grandfather – someone she had always enjoyed talking to about everything – whether she would ever have a child after many years of unsuccessful attempts to conceive (Interlocutor EI037, female, 1992, 20.3.2025). Questions related to pregnancy, childbirth and rebirth are particularly common. In Antónia's case, questions about the future were raised on several occasions during séances with deceased relatives. She especially remembers one session in which she received the exact date of her child's birth from a deceased family member during the séance (Interlocutor EI041, female, 1982, 28.3.2025).

Overall, the practice of seeking advice through mediums cannot be understood simply as a one-time response to crisis. Rather, it constitutes an ongoing process of maintaining relationships and producing meaning, in which the bond with the deceased becomes an active resource for navigating everyday decisions, uncertainties and life transitions.

4. When the Dead are in Crisis

In connection with mediumistic advice and guidance, an important question arises: is this relationship one-directional? Do the deceased merely assist the living in their moments of crisis, or are there also situations in which the living can offer support to the dead? Narratives from contemporary mediumistic practice clearly suggest that crises may affect not only the living but also the dead.

Although the idea of hell has largely receded in modern societies (Tomlinson, 2024: 18), one of the recurring first questions in séances remains – perhaps precisely for this reason – where the deceased “is now”. In the type of séance examined in this study, every mediation begins with the medium distinguishing three basic states and asking the summoned soul where it is currently located: in the light or heaven, in an intermediate (“in-between”) state, or on earth.

The crisis of the dead is most often associated with this intermediate (“in-between”) state. A crisis is said to occur when the soul becomes stuck in this state and cannot – or does not dare to – move forward. According to the accounts of my interlocutors, this condition often becomes apparent only during the séance itself. At the same time, relatives frequently report that even before the séance they had somehow “felt” that something was not right, that the deceased may have been unable to “cross over”. In such cases, mediumistic mediation fulfils not only a diagnostic but also an active role. Within the framework of the séance, the soul is “helped across” into the light, and the success of this transition is often confirmed during a subsequent séance.

In my fieldwork, cases in which the deceased is not “well” on the other side occur less frequently, but they do appear. However, this situation is not interpreted as punishment or damnation; rather, it is most often associated with the condition of the intermediate (“in-between”) state. The narratives emphasise that the deceased’s unsettled state is not framed as the result of any failure or fault on the part of the living. At the same time, it is often understood as being shaped by relational factors, such as unresolved conflicts from earthly life, intense mourning by relatives, or unprocessed emotions surrounding the death. In this sense, the condition is not attributed to blame, but to ongoing emotional and relational ties between the living and the dead. In some cases, the intermediate state is not necessarily described as a dramatic form of wandering. It may also appear as a form of waiting: the deceased is said to remain there, sometimes waiting for loved ones to die as well, so that they may move forward together.

The dead can thus be helped during the séance itself. At the same time, however, the living may also assist the dead in other ways beyond the immediate mediation, particularly when the relationship had been burdened by conflict during earthly life. This dynamic is illustrated by the story of Júlia (47), who lives in a small town near Budapest and, in her forties, moved from being a client to becoming a practicing spiritualist specialist working with the three-legged stool technique. According to her account, she maintains an active and supportive relationship with her deceased mother through the stool. With her father, however – who had been severely abusive toward her during his lifetime – she is able to connect only indirectly, through her mother. She describes her father as existing in an “asleep”, unconscious state within the intermediate (“in-between”) realm, which she interprets as the consequence of his alcoholism and unresolved struggles in life. Júlia understands her own work of mourning and self-reflection – acts of forgiveness, acceptance and the processing of past conflicts – as something that not only brings relief to herself but also helps her father become more conscious in the intermediate state (Interlocutor EI046, female, 1978, 19.6.2025). In this interpretation, the living and the dead are simultaneously “working” on the same relationship so that the conflict does not continue to be transmitted either through karma or across generations.

At the same time, it is important to emphasise that, despite such examples, the primary purpose of the signs and messages from the dead is usually not to request help. Rather, as ethnographic studies from Western Europe and Anglo-Saxon literature likewise suggest (see, for example, Badone, 2018: 297–298), their main function is to reassure the bereaved. Most often, the message conveyed by these signs is simply that the deceased is “well”, “present” and still watching over loved ones.

Only rarely does the dead person address a concrete request to the living – such as matters related to the grave, commemorative practices or family decisions. In contemporary narratives, an idyllic image of the afterlife tends to dominate: the deceased are described as living in a loving, joyful and evolving state, free from bodily suffering or illness. Another possible intention of the dead is to guide their relatives toward a medium. When the signs sent by the deceased are not sufficient to maintain the relationship, narratives suggest that the dead often “lead” their relatives to a medium, where indirect signals can finally give way to more direct communication. Edina and Gáspár interpret their own path to a medium in this way: they had never previously heard of the medium they eventually consulted, yet they believe that their deceased little boy gradually guided them toward that encounter so that communication could take place (Interlocutor EI043, female, 1980; Interlocutor EI044, male, 1972, 16.6.2025).

During séances, it is also not uncommon for figures other than the person originally summoned to appear. The deceased may bring along other family members or friends who are said to be “waiting” for the meeting. Since it cannot be known in advance who will “arrive”, repeated séances also carry a certain sense of anticipation. Narratives frequently express the idea that the dead themselves welcome these encounters. They are described as encouraging relatives to return and sometimes even explicitly asking them to come again. The maintenance of the relationship is therefore not only important for the living but also for the dead. Antónia expressed this as follows:

They say that once someone has died, they should remain there – that they should not be called back or disturbed. I think that is the old mentality. In fact, they need this just as much as we do: to feel that not everything has been lost, that nothing is truly gone, that we have simply transformed into certain forms of energy. That's all. (Interlocutor EI041, female, 1982, 28.3.2025)

Overall, the narratives surrounding mediumistic practice suggest that relationships do not automatically end after death, nor do they function solely as tools for managing the crises of the living. In certain cases, the living become active participants in the dead's own processes of coping and purification in the other world. The relationship thus becomes a form of ongoing relational work through which both the living and the dead participate in processes of healing, interpretation and moral repair.

5. Experiencing Presence: Embodiment, Touch and Mediumistic Encounter

According to the accounts of my interlocutors, mediumistic séances are almost without exception described as “incredible”, “wonderful”, “cathartic”, “uplifting” and “comforting” experiences – something that, in their view, everyone should experience at least once in their lifetime. These occasions are often accompanied by intense emotional expressions: crying, laughter, bodily trembling, or prolonged moments of silence. The first encounter in particular often remains fixed in memory as an incomprehensible, “unexplainable miracle”, which later serves as an important reference point. As discussed earlier, the repeated desire to attend further séances is largely connected to the fact that the encounter itself functions as a cathartic experience.

One key element of this experience lies in the sensory dimension of the three-legged stool technique, particularly in the possibility of bodily contact. A characteristic opening moment of the séance occurs when the identified soul “greet” those present. Using the small stool, the soul slowly traces the outline of one relative’s palm while the participant’s other hand rests on the stool throughout the process. This gesture in itself produces a powerful bodily experience, as the person directly senses the slow movement across their palm and the subtle intensity of the touches. Although the movement is mediated by the stool, participants clearly attribute the agency to the deceased: “she/he guides it”, “she/he is touching”.

During the séance – provided that participants consent – other forms of touch may also occur. Helga (49), a mother living in a town in Fejér County, recalled the experience as follows:

Laci [the medium] asked me whether I would like Rebi [my daughter] to touch me. You know, Rebi used to have very dark skin, but when she became ill it turned pale, not as dark as before. I told Laci that yes, I would like that, and he told Rebi to try to lift my hand. And imagine this: from my elbow down my arm started turning pale, as if it were her hand. Laci even said that it was no longer my hand but hers. And then she lifted my hand – my hand rose – and I was crying so much that I could barely see, and she stroked my face. With my own hand. (Interlocutor EI034, female, 1976, 17.3.2025)

Physical contact during the séance is not limited to touch alone. Both on social media and in interviews, several participants reported that through the mediation of the three-legged stool it is even possible to “dance” with the deceased – that is, to move rhythmically together across the paper to music.

These experiences can be interpreted with the help of scholarship in the study of religion and spirituality that places bodily experience and emotional intensity at the centre of analysis. In the technique examined here, this sense of immediacy is further intensified by the tactile dimension of the encounter. According to Thomas Csordas’s theory of embodiment, religious and spiritual experience emerges not primarily as a cognitive conviction but as a form of experience organised through the body (Csordas, 2002). In the séance, belief does not precede experience but follows it: the body “knows” first what interpretation articulates only later. The touch of the dead is therefore not merely a metaphorical expression but a bodily event through which participants experience the continuity of the relationship in their own bodies.

In this sense, the body is not simply a mediating channel but an active participant: it perceives, responds and generates meaning. Csordas’s later discussion of intercorporeality (2008) further refines this perspective by describing experience as a relation between bodies. From this viewpoint, touch is not a one-directional act but a reciprocal bodily event in which the boundary between the living and the dead temporarily becomes permeable. The caress, the lifting of the hand, or the shared movement mediated by the three-legged

stool thus becomes experientially present not as representation but as intercorporeal presence. From this perspective, the mediumistic séance – particularly when mediated through the three-legged stool technique – is not merely a communicative event but a bodily encounter. Through it, the relationship between the living and the dead becomes not only interpretable but also perceptible. Embodied presence and bodily contact therefore play a crucial role in shaping the séance as an experience that participants often describe as cathartic, healing and valuable in its own right.

6. Going to a Medium: The Experience-Oriented Logic of Consumer Society

One consequence of the cathartic and healing experience is that clients often wish to experience it repeatedly. At the same time, an important element in understanding the phenomenon is that participation in a mediumistic séance requires a significant financial investment. Several interlocutors reported in interviews that attending a séance – and sometimes travelling several hundred kilometres to do so – represents a serious financial burden for which they prepare consciously over the course of months. The séance thus appears not only as a spiritual event but also as a service requiring planning, financial sacrifice and the prioritisation of resources. Going to a medium today can therefore be understood as a form of expensive gift. It may be a gift to oneself – an act of self-care – a gift to a family member, or even a gift to the deceased, enabling communication to take place once again. On anniversaries, holidays or birthdays, family members sometimes jointly finance a consultation, and in some cases even organise it as a surprise for one another.

This practice clearly situates the mediumistic experience within the logic of experience-based consumption, where the “gift” does not take material form but is realised as an emotional and spiritual experience. Mediums themselves actively contribute to this process of meaning-making: on their social media platforms they regularly emphasise the spiritually “significant” character of anniversaries and holidays as moments that carry special messages.

The logic of gift-giving also shapes the question of when it is considered appropriate or desirable to consult a medium. In contemporary practice, two closely related issues emerge regarding the timing of such encounters. The first concerns how much time should elapse after a death before the first attempt at contact is considered legitimate or “effective”. The second relates to whether there are particular moments that render communication especially meaningful or intense.

In the mediumistic discourses examined here, it is commonly suggested that a certain waiting period should follow the death. On their online platforms as well as during personal consultations, mediums often recommend waiting at least several months – frequently up to half a year – before attempting the first séance. This period is described as allowing the deceased to complete their “transition”, while also giving the bereaved time to move through the initial stages of mourning. Such recommendations can be interpreted within both spiritual and psychologising frameworks: on the one hand, they emphasise the undisturbed progression of the soul’s journey, and on the other, they frame emotional stabilisation as a prerequisite for meaningful communication.

At the same time, particular dates acquire special significance within mediumistic discourse. Birthdays, name days, All Souls' Day and the anniversary of death are often presented as liminal moments that possess heightened communicative potential. According to mediumistic narratives, these occasions may "open" channels of connection and enable encounters that are especially emotionally intense (cf. White, 2019: 99–106).

This understanding is closely linked to the idea that communication with the other world can be cultivated through practice. In the book *Ymola*, for example, it is suggested that the more frequently contact is attempted, the easier communication becomes, as the deceased gradually "learn the path" toward the living (Bujka, Hegedűs, 2000). In this sense, mediumistic contact is constructed not as a singular and exceptional event but as a repeatable and gradually cultivated practice – an interpretation that further facilitates its incorporation into patterns of regular consumption and experience-oriented seeking.

The framing of the mediumistic encounter as a form of gift can also be situated within broader discussions of spirituality and consumer culture. Much scholarship interprets contemporary alternative spirituality – particularly the New Age milieu – as a "spiritual marketplace" in which individuals select from diverse options according to personal needs (Bowman, 1999; Roof, 2001). Empirical studies show that these networks are often organised through commodified forms such as workshops, therapies, books and events (Heelas et al., 2005; Rose, 2005), with circulation among services functioning as a key organising principle (Redden, 2016). At the same time, scholars emphasise that participation in such practices may also serve processes of identity formation and meaning-making rather than representing mere commodification (Aupers, Houtman, 2006; Heelas, 2008).

In my interviews, when I asked participants how they had discovered the possibility of consulting a medium, most responded that "the internet suggested it". They had not actively searched for such services; rather, the option appeared unexpectedly on their social media feeds. As Renser and Tiidenberg (2024) argue, contemporary spiritual practices are not only commodified but are also actively reproduced through the social and technical affordances of digital platforms. Social media does not merely make spiritual services visible; it also structures their circulation, shaping which practices become desirable while encouraging practitioners to build credibility through emotional and relational labour in online environments.

CONCLUSION

This article has examined the contemporary Hungarian practice of consulting mediums through the case of the three-legged stool technique associated with Antal Bujka and his students. It has shown that, despite the highly individualised and weakly institutionalised character of contemporary Hungarian mediumship, the motivations of clients closely resemble those described in Western European and Anglo-American scholarship: mourners seek reassurance, continuity and interpretive frameworks through which death can be made meaningful rather than arbitrary. At the same time, the Hungarian material highlights a less frequently discussed aspect of mediumistic relationships, namely their

reciprocity: communication with the dead is not always oriented solely toward the needs of the living, but may also be understood as assisting the dead in processes of transition, healing and moral repair.

The study also argues that the significance of these séances lies not only in the messages conveyed but in the sensory and embodied form of the encounter itself. In the three-legged stool technique, certainty is produced less through doctrine than through bodily experience, touch, movement and the material trace of writing. Mediumistic communication thus appears not simply as a channel of information but as a relational and experiential practice through which the bond between the living and the dead becomes perceptible.

Finally, the article suggests that contemporary Hungarian mediumship should be understood as part of a broader field of globalised spirituality that is increasingly shaped by digital platforms and the logics of consumer culture. Access to mediums is often mediated by social media, while the séance itself is framed as a meaningful, repeatable and often costly experience. In this sense, the contemporary consultation with mediums reveals not only changing ways of relating to the dead, but also broader transformations in how grief, spirituality and personal crisis are organised in late modernity.

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STATEMENT ON RESEARCH DATA MANAGEMENT

The article is based on research data stored in the author's personal archive, which will be deposited later this year in the Social Science Data Archives (ADP – Arhiv družboslovnih podatkov; <https://www.adp.fdv.uni-lj.si/en/>), where it will be accessible, to a limited extent, for scientific and research purposes only.

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ZAKAJ LJUDJE POIŠČEJO MEDIJE: MOTIVACIJE IN UTELEŠENA IZKUŠNJA MED KLIENTI PRAKSE TRINOŽNEGA STOLČKA NA MADŽARSKEM

Prispevek na podlagi etnografskega terenskega raziskovanja obravnava malo poznano obliko sodobnega medijstva na Madžarskem, t. i. tehniko trinožnega stolčka. Raziskava se osredotoča na izvajalce te metode in njihove kliente, ki so se z njo seznanili bodisi prek Antala Bujke bodisi prek tradicije, povezane z njegovim delovanjem. Na podlagi intervjujev, opazovanja z udeležbo in neposrednih izkušenj s seansami članek raziskuje življenjske okoliščine in motive, ki ljudi vodijo k iskanju stika z mediji, ter načine, kako medijske seanse prispevajo k osmišljanju smrti, izgube in negotovosti.

Prispevek predstavi delovanje tehnike trinožnega stolčka in jo umesti v širši zgodovinski ter primerjalni okvir. Po svoji strukturi je metoda podobna različnim oblikam pisanja s posredovanjem predmetov, ki so bile povezane s spiritualizmom

19. stoletja, kar omogoča primerjavo kljub različnim zgodovinskim in družbenim okoliščinam, v katerih se te prakse pojavljajo.

Intervjuji kažejo, da je najpomembnejši razlog za obisk medija iskanje gotovosti o obstoju posmrtnega življenja ter želja po ohranjanju odnosa z umrlimi bližnjimi. Pomemben delež sodelujočih se je na medije obrnil po izkušnji izgube, zlasti po nenadnih, tragičnih ali drugače težko sprejemljivih smrtih. V tem kontekstu medijska komunikacija ne zagotavlja le tolažbe, temveč tudi interpretativni okvir, znotraj katerega smrt ni razumljena kot dokončni konec, temveč kot preobrazba trajajočega odnosa. Raziskava kaže, da je za številne kliente posebej pomembna izkustvena gotovost, ki pogosto predhodi verovanju in ga tudi oblikuje.

Hkrati raziskava pokaže, da obiskovanje medijev ni omejeno zgolj na soočanje z žalovanjem. Odnosi z mrtvimi delujejo tudi kot vir podpore v vsakdanjem življenju. Klienti pogosto iščejo nasvete glede zdravja, družinskih odnosov, vprašanj, povezanih z delovnim okoljem, ter pomembnih življenjskih odločitev. Medijske seanse tako postanejo del dolgotrajnega odnosa, v katerem umrli prevzemajo vlogo podpornikov in svetovalcev.

Ena izmed pomembnih ugotovitev raziskave je, da medijski odnosi niso organizirani zgolj okoli potreb živih. Pripovedi sodelujočih pogosto izražajo prepričanje, da lahko pomoč potrebujejo tudi mrtvi sami, na primer kadar naj bi bili ujeti v vmesnem stanju ali kadar njihov napredek ovirajo nerazrešeni zemeljski odnosi. V takšnih primerih seanse postanejo sredstvo zdravljenja, sprave in prehoda ne le za žive, temveč tudi za mrtve.

Prispevek posebno pozornost namenja tudi telesnim in čutnim razsežnostim medijske izkušnje. Ena od značilnosti tehnike trinožnega stolčka je, da komunikacija postane zaznavna prek pisanja, gibanja in dotika. Po pripovedih sodelujočih so med najpomembnejšimi vidiki seans prav telesne izkušnje, prek katerih prisotnost umrlih postane neposredno občutena. Ob opiranju na teorijo utelešenja Thomasa Csordasa članek zagovarja stališče, da medijska gotovost temelji manj na kognitivnem prepričanju ali doktrinarni veri kot na izkušnjah, posredovanih skozi telo.

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Painting as Communication with the Deceased and Other Non-Human Beings

—————Tomaž Simetinger—————

The article examines painting as a practice of relating to the dead and other non-human beings in contemporary and historical contexts. Drawing on vernacular religion, it approaches these relationships not as fixed beliefs system but as experiences emerging through bodily perception, learning, and artistic practice. The article focuses on ethnographic research with a contemporary Slovenian painter, Ana, whose painting develops through sensitivity to presence rather than trance or mediumistic possession. Her practice is compared with the spiritualist painting of Georgiana Houghton and Hilma af Klint, where artistic creation relied on passive mediumship and the subordination of the artist's body to spiritual agencies. The comparison reveals a shift from hierarchical models of revelation toward relational forms of creation, in which painting functions both as a liminal object and relational process through which connections between the living and the dead acquire temporary stability.

KEYWORDS: vernacular religion, spiritualism, mediumship, embodiment, perception, painting

Članek obravnava slikanje kot prakso vzpostavljanja odnosov z mrtvimi in drugimi nečloveškimi bitji v sodobnem in zgodovinskem kontekstu. Izhaja iz perspektive vernakularne religije, ki teh odnosov ne razume kot del zaprtih verovanjskih sistemov, temveč kot izkustva, ki nastajajo skozi telesno zaznavo, učenje in umetniško prakso. Članek temelji na etnografski raziskavi sodobne slovenske slikarke Ane, katere slikanje se razvija skozi občutek za prisotnost mrtvih in ne skozi stanje transa ali izgubo telesne avtonomije zaradi vpliva duhovnih sil. Njena praksa je primerjana s spiritualističnim slikarstvom Georgiane Houghton in Hilme af Klint, pri katerih je umetniško ustvarjanje temeljilo na pasivnem medijstvu in podreditvi umetničinega telesa duhovnim silam. Primerjava pokaže premik od hierarhičnih modelov razodetja k relacijskim oblikam ustvarjanja, pri katerih slika deluje hkrati kot liminalni objekt, slikanje pa kot relacijski proces, skozi katerega se med živimi in mrtvimi vzpostavljajo začasno stabilne povezave.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: vernakularna religija, spiritualizem, medijstvo, utelešanje, percepcija, slikanje

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, discussions about religion, belief and related experiences have moved away from questions of doctrine and institutional forms. They have focused on analysing practices as people actually live, perform and interpret them in their everyday lives.

In this context, the concept of vernacular religion has emerged, which does not refer to a specific type of religion, but rather to an analytical approach to understanding diverse religious practices, their processual nature and often also their internal contradictions (Primiano, 1995; Bowman, Valk, 2012: 1–8). Vernacular religion reminds us that beliefs, practices and narratives are always embedded in specific life circumstances, local histories and personal contexts, and that they cannot be reduced to coherent, institutionalised and unambiguous systems of rules or beliefs.

As Marion Bowman and Ülo Valk point out, the vernacular perspective rejects normative divisions between “official” and “unofficial”, rational and irrational, and instead focuses on the ways in which people develop meanings, establish relationships and creatively co-shape religious imaginaries in practice (Bowman, Valk, 2012: 3–10). This approach highlights one of the key characteristics of vernacular religious practices, namely that, in contrast to institutionalised and “prescribed” interpretations of religious truths, they are often ambiguous, incoherent and shift between different principles and interpretations. This is an integral part of religious life, which recognises the central role of bodily practices in shaping religious experience, which is also of key importance for this article.

In this context, relationships with the deceased, ancestors and other non-human beings become understandable as part of everyday religious practices, rather than as anomalies or residual elements of past religious systems. The vernacular perspective draws attention to the fact that the meanings of such relationships are not given in advance, but are established through concrete situations and actions, often in connection with (family) memories, local moral economies, and personal experiences, rather than through abstract theological debates (Bowman, Valk, 2012: 12–15; Primiano, 2012: 385–389).

For the purposes of this article, this point is crucial, as it allows relationships with the deceased to be approached not as fixed beliefs that precede practice, but as relational experiences that emerge through specific embodied activities. This perspective makes it possible to analyse painting not as an illustration of pre-existing religious ideas or images, but as a practice through which relationships with the deceased and other non-human beings¹ are actively formed, negotiated and made meaningful in concrete situations.

This understanding also enables a rethinking of spiritualism that is crucial for the analytical framework of this article. Historical research has shown that nineteenth- and early twentieth-century spiritualism did not operate as a unified religious system with a

¹ The “deceased and (other) non-human beings” discussed in this article can also be understood as “invisible beings” in the sense proposed by Thomas G. Plante and others. The term has been analytically developed to refer to relational spiritual actors rather than to abstract systems of belief. In this perspective, invisibility does not imply the absence of agency or perception, but rather the absence of material physicality, while presence is confirmed through experience, relationships and observable effects on individuals and social situations (Plante et al., 2023).

At the same time, the concept of non-human beings is not without problems. It can be misleading, as it does not clearly distinguish between embodied beings, such as animals, and immaterial beings, such as ghosts or the dead. Nevertheless, I retain the term (other) non-human beings in a deliberately narrow and limited sense, referring exclusively to immaterial or non-human beings encountered in the religious and spiritual practices discussed in this article. In this sense, the term does not denote a homogeneous or fixed category, but serves as an analytical marker for beings that do not belong to the human category, while at the same time clearly distinguishing themselves from biologically embodied life and abstract conceptual entities.

stable doctrine, but as a heterogeneous and internally contested field of practices situated at the intersection of popular religion, experimental science and emerging theories of perception. In the British context, Alex Owen demonstrates that spiritualist and occult practices formed part of a broader cultural effort to renegotiate “enchantment” under modern conditions, in which invisible worlds were approached through concrete techniques, disciplined experimentation and embodied practices rather than through fixed theological propositions (Owen, 2004: 4–8, 17–23).

This historiographical insight is important for the present article because it allows spiritualist painting to be approached historically not as the visual expression of a coherent belief system, but as one of the practices through which relationships with the deceased were actively constituted and stabilised. Brower’s analysis of psychical research in France further shows that practices such as mediumship, automatic writing and drawing functioned as techniques operating in a space of uncertainty, where the meaning of spiritual phenomena was continuously negotiated between competing scientific, religious and experiential interpretations (Brower, 2010: 16–18). Seen in this way, painting can be analysed as a historically specific practice of communication with the dead, in which meaning did not precede practice but emerged through embodied engagement and situational interpretation.

Viewed through the prism of vernacular religion, spiritualism can therefore be understood as a field in which relationships between the living and the dead are constituted through everyday practices, more or less established technologies of communication, and personal narratives (Primiano, 1995: 44–46; Bowman, Valk, 2012: 1–8). This conceptual move provides the analytical foundation for the article as a whole: it allows for a comparative examination of historical and contemporary painting practices without presupposing an identical belief system, and instead focuses on how relationships with the dead are produced, experienced and stabilised through specific practices of painting.

The starting point for the research is ethnographic work, which forms one of the central pillars of the article, and is based on fieldwork with the contemporary Slovenian painter Ana.² Her painting takes place in constant dialogue with the deceased or other non-human beings. These are not always understood as part of existing and fixed imaginaries, but their meaning is revealed in their experience. In the cases discussed, it is a presence that manifests itself through bodily perception, and is later translated into colour, composition, etc.

The historical examples of painters Georgiana Houghton and Hilma af Klint discussed in the article provide a comparative insight into different configurations of these relationships. In their practices, relationships with non-human beings were part of relatively clearly articulated religious frameworks that defined hierarchies between the living and the dead and the role of the artist as a medium (Oberter, 2006).

The central research question of the article is therefore: how, in specific historical and contemporary circumstances, are relationships with the deceased and other non-human beings established and understood through everyday religious practices,

² The name is fictitious.

not as predetermined beliefs, but as experiences that are shaped through specific practices of painting? In this context, the question also arises as to how painting functions as one of the places where relationships between the artists in question, the deceased and other non-human beings are perceived, interpreted and acquire social relevance.

The article is based on a combination of ethnographic and historical-comparative research. The empirical section is based on in-depth conversations with the contemporary Slovenian painter Ana, whose painting process I observed on several occasions in the summer of 2025. Fieldwork was conducted over several weeks and included repeated visits to Ana at her home, spontaneous encounters within shared social networks, occasional telephone conversations, and one meeting in Ljubljana. Some conversations were audio-recorded with her consent, while a substantial part of the material derives from detailed fieldnotes written after the encounters.

The historical part of the article is based on an analysis of primary sources and existing literature on spiritualism, with an emphasis on the painting practices of Georgiana Houghton and Hilma af Klint. The methodological approach allows for a comparison of different configurations of the relationship between artwork, body and non-human actors in contemporary and historical contexts.

THE PAINTER ANA AND THE SPIRITUAL WORLD

Ana is a fifty-year-old academically trained painter who also makes her living from painting. She lives in a family house with some land in a rural area of southern Slovenia. In her work, she creates in dialogue with the deceased and other non-human beings. I first met her a few years ago at one of my lectures and we later became somewhat better acquainted. She confided in me about her way of painting and was also willing to participate in the research.

Ana primarily grew up in a broader Roman Catholic social environment, although her family – while embedded in it – did not practise Roman Catholicism and its associated rituals, except on rare occasions. Through her own experiences, independent study, the use of literature and, above all, meditative practices, she gradually developed her own distinctive belief system. The formation of this belief system, which also includes elements of Catholicism, was a gradual process of transformation. As she recalls, she felt the presence of different beings even as a child, but at the time she was unable to articulate this clearly, so several years of research and learning followed. She described the transition from a child's understanding of the "liveliness" of nature to her high-school art experiments as follows:

As a child, I liked to be alone. I used to create things out of clay by the stream. For me, it was so alive back then. The water was alive. The trees were alive. When I started high school, I immersed myself in this world. Especially through art history and Slovenian language classes. All the feelings that had pulsed within me as a child came back to life. Specifically,

it was the artist Michelangelo Buonarroti who transformed me. I saw one of his works. One drawing. In it, there was a door that made me understand that the world is multidimensional. (TP 2022025)

Today, her belief system differs in many ways from Roman Catholic dogma and takes the form of a vernacular religious practice based on personal experiences of communication with the deceased and non-human beings.

Nature plays a key role in defining her spiritual world.

Nature is a land inhabited by various forms of life. Some are embodied, like trees, air ... Others are less embodied. These are what contemporary cultures call invisible. They are less densely embodied. (TP 25062025)

Her painting tools and aids, all derived from nature, play an important role in both her painting process and the placement of her work within the natural world: “*The brush, for example, is made of wood. Yes, these are trees. Pigments are the mineral world /.../ The canvas is plants*” (TP 26062025). The tools are thus not merely instruments; they carry a deeper spiritual significance embedded in the cosmic order, facilitating her connection with different levels of the cosmos and to the creative process itself.

For Ana, *nature* is an intertwining of various material and immaterial parts of the cosmos that complement each other. “*For me, this [the immaterial world, note by T. S.] is not another world; for me, it is part of this [material, note by T. S.] world*” (TP 25062025). In her opinion, matter is created through the cooperation of spiritual beings. “*Matter has different dimensions, and different beings cooperate in each dimension. For example, before atoms and their condensation occur, these beings cooperate*” (TP 25062025). In this context, it is easier to understand what she has often pointed out in conversation: for her, the deceased and spiritual beings do not represent a homogeneous group. They include humans, plants and animals – essentially any embodied beings – while also retaining a spiritual dimension. In addition, she includes other non-human and immaterial beings in her representations, such as nature spirits and other non-human beings whose identity is often not clearly specified. She depicts them on equal visual footing with human figures. Regardless of their identity and embodiment, they can also have human-like characteristics. A careful reading of the fieldwork material reveals how Ana mentions that these beings can be troublesome when it comes to communication and painting: “*Even if they come unhappy or grumpy ... I still invite them.*” They carry trauma: “*I don’t paint traumatised ones.*” Similarly: “*They are not ideal beings. They have their own history. Some are very wounded.*” They can be confused: “*Some don’t know what to do with themselves*” (TP 26062025). It is also true that non-human beings can bring various symbolic gifts and the like.

This understanding of nature, (im)materiality, visible and invisible beings shows that Ana’s spiritual world is not based on a distinction between human and non-human, material and immaterial, but on an ontological continuum in which different forms of existence interact and co-create the cosmos. It is precisely the emphasis on shared inner qualities,

relationships and cooperation between beings that opens up the possibility of analytically placing Ana's ideas within the framework of animistic understandings of the world. When asked how she herself sees her belief system, Ana replied that it is closest to animism. Her position thus approximates the animistic ideas defined by Philippe Descola in his work *Beyond Nature and Culture* (2015). In animism, humans and non-humans originate from a similar *interiority*, but have different physicalities or exteriors. In Ana's case, this is the so-called "*drop of life*" or "*essence of life*", which "*comes from the primordial sea of life*" and is supposed to be common to all materially embodied and spiritual beings.

By explaining this, we can come closer to the concept of her beliefs through the relational definition of animism proposed by Graham Harvey. He understands animism not as a belief in specific entities, but as a way of being in the world in which "persons" are those with whom relationships are established. This does not refer only to humans, but also to non-human (spiritual) persons (Harvey, 2010). In this context, selfhood is not a given characteristic, but is established through the possibility of relationship, response and communication between humans and spiritual beings.

THE BEGINNING, LEARNING ABOUT FEELINGS AND THEIR INTERPRETATION

The beginnings of Ana's painting practice are not framed as a revelation or a sudden breakthrough, but as the gradual emergence of sensory perception that initially had no clear interpretation. As she herself points out, the primary trigger for her to start painting was a physically perceived feeling of presence, which was not yet connected to specific images of the deceased or other beings: "*the trigger for starting to paint is a strong feeling of presence*" (TP 25062025). At first, this presence was not understood as communication with the dead, but as a general state of openness and intense perception that was established through working with the body, breathing and "*connecting with nature*". Ana therefore points out that before painting she does not use meditation in the classical sense, but tries to attune her body or connect it with the environment: "*No, I don't meditate. I try to breathe with the earth. /.../ I try to transfer it into myself, to transfer its harmony into myself. And then my vibration changes.*"

Ana emphasises that this perception does not come automatically, but that she had to learn it gradually. This learning took place primarily as a recognition of different "worlds" or levels of presence. When I ask her how she summons the dead or their "worlds", she replies that it is not a technique of calling in the narrow sense of the word, but a learning process through which one comes to recognise their presence:

When I encountered these beings thirty or forty years ago, I learned to recognise their vibration. And now I don't use any particular technique, now I just remember the vibration of this world [of the dead, note by T. S.].
(TP 30042025)

This indicates that the spiritual world is constantly present, it just needs to be perceived and connected with. Anne Kalvig notes that contemporary spiritualist practices often frame relationships with the dead in terms of ongoing presence and relational engagement rather than discrete ritual acts of summoning (Kalgig, 2016).

For Ana, learning to perceive has developed as an open and unfinished process. At its core is the gradual formation of an internal reference point that harmonises or “vibrates” with different worlds. In this sense, learning also means differentiating sensations: only when a certain vibration is recognised can one understand and judge whether its source belongs to the inner flow of perceptions or to the presence of someone or something outside. Ana explicitly emphasises that learning perception does not mean a departure from reason or a loss of reflection, but rather their simultaneous functioning: *“This does not mean that my logic dies, it all works the same way. It helps me understand sensation”* (TP 30042025). The interpretation of sensations thus takes place simultaneously on the perceptual and rational levels.

This distinction between “mine” and “not-mine” is also related to Ana’s understanding of the different “layers” of space. She explains that she is very concerned with the *“identity of different layers of space”* and that she can therefore *“knock on the doors of different temples”*, where “temple” means *“one level of existence, for example the space of ancestors or the space of water beings ...”* (TP 30042025). Distinguishing between sensations therefore also means distinguishing between contexts: it is not enough to feel something, but one must orient oneself in relation to the level or “space” from which the sensation originates. It is only through this orientation that her sensations acquire meaning. Learning perception thus means learning to exist on the porous border between the inner and outer worlds, which Susan Greenwood describes as the experience of “being in two worlds at once” (Greenwood, 2000: 14).

It is important that Ana also describes this process as a former inability to recognise perceptions, which changed over time. When talking about her experience with the presence of her ancestor (her “aunt”), she explicitly states that at that time she did not yet possess the language and orientation for what was happening to her: *“At that time, I didn’t ... I didn’t know”* and: *“At that time, I was not very aware of this space of ancestors ... I didn’t know that it was ... a space, that it was full of them”* (TP 26062025). According to Susan Greenwood, who studied learning in the context of magic, such perception is not innate, but the result of long-term learning and training of attention: *“The essence of a magical training is to open up the magician’s awareness to these forces”* (Greenwood, 2000: 23).

The fieldwork data shows that Ana does not understand her experiences in terms of control or the clear identification of beings, but as a form of communication involving mutual invitations to meet. It is also important that she herself often emphasises that, in the process of painting, it is not always clear who exactly is entering into the relationship: *“Sometimes I don’t even know who is coming. I just feel that someone is there”* (TP 30042025). Such indeterminacy is not understood as a problem, but as an integral part of the relationship. Harvey points out that animistic relationships are often characterised precisely by an ambiguity of identity and the gradual revelation of the self through interaction, not through prior categorisation (Harvey, 2010: 17–19).

FROM PERCEPTION TO PAINTING LANGUAGE

Understanding Ana's creative process does not stem from a predetermined institutional or otherwise prescribed system of beliefs, but from practices that are formed through everyday behaviour and relationships. As Primiano emphasises, religion is "religion as it is lived", that is, a set of practices, meanings and relationships that people actually live and establish in their lives (Primiano, 1995: 44–46; also Kalvig, 2016: 18–22). In this context, painting does not function as an illustration of existing ideas, but as a process in which meaning is gradually formed.

Ana describes this process very directly: "*First comes the sensation. Then I have to translate it into logical language*" (TP 26062025). In this sequence, perception does not appear as an already formed message, but as a bodily sensation that requires further interpretation. Tehri Utriainen comes to a similar conclusion in his study of communication with angels, where he shows how individuals learn to understand their own thoughts or somatic perceptions as "the message or touch of an angel" (Utriainen, 2014: 248). The key point is that in both cases, perception precedes interpretation. Only through a further process is this bodily sensation gradually translated into a pictorial composition, colour and figuration, with the author actively shaping the final image through her collaboration.

The painting process begins with bodily attention. D'Angelo defines such attention as "creative attention" precisely because it does not stem from existing meanings, but rather establishes them in the very act of perception (D'Angelo, 2018: 100–102, 112–116). According to D'Angelo, in perception before attention, we do not have already formed objects or units of meaning, but rather an undifferentiated, still open field of perception. It is only attention that makes something in this field stand out as relevant, meaningful, worthy of response. He therefore writes that attention is creative because it "constitutes the meaning of our experience" (D'Angelo, 2018: 100–103). Such attention does not function as a spotlight directed at existing objects that have meaning, but as a process that first establishes a field within which perceptible units can emerge and, through this, construct units of meaning. In other words, attention merely establishes the condition for meaning to be created (*ibid.*).

In this sense, the focus of analysis shifts from the question of *what* is perceived to the question of *how* perception acts through the body and thus *how* meaning is created. D'Angelo emphasises that it is precisely this pre-reflective, bodily attention that opens up the horizon of expectation, thus enabling perception to gradually articulate itself into more stable forms of meaning (D'Angelo, 2018: 104–105). If we connect the insights from the previous chapters, we see that Ana first had to learn to focus her attention on bodily sensations. This enabled her to transfer this attentiveness into the subsequent painting process. Painting thus functions as a space in which perception is not only expressed, but also constituted as a meaningful whole through creative attention. Only by paying attention to her bodily sensations does she create the conditions in which their meaning can take shape and be transferred onto the canvas. To use Ana's own words:

First, I am always in a kind of sensation ... as if [she pauses to reflect, note T. S.] ... very gentle waves ... a kind of vibration that comes [she pauses to reflect, note T. S.] ... and becomes denser and denser ... first an image, then a sound ... and then I can translate it into logical language. (TP 26062025)

According to Ana, this language of “logic” is the language of the painter’s world that we humans understand – the language of artistic rules of painting, composition, colours, etc.

This role of the body is consistent with research into the sensory and material dimensions of religion, which emphasises that relationships with invisible actors are often realised through sensory experience and material practices. Birgit Meyer points out that this is not an automatic transfer from inner feeling to aesthetic form, but a process that can only stabilise in a concrete social situation (Meyer, 2006: 23–44). For Ana, too, meaning does not arise at the moment of perception, but gradually takes shape in the creative process itself, in which bodily sensation is given visual and figural articulation. D’Angelo speaks of this in terms of the subject’s placement in the environment (D’Angelo, 2018: 113–115), which coincides with the social component of the creative process also highlighted by Birgit Meyer.

In the ethnographic material, this is also evident in Ana’s emphasis on bodily perception, which she understands as distinctly individual, while at the same time emphasising that in the process of painting she gives this perception a form that can be very different and socially conditioned. She points out that anyone could paint a different image of these beings, but she consciously decides to depict the deceased and other non-human beings in ways that are closer to human figures, as this enables easier or more intense interaction between people and non-people (TP 26062025). In this context, perception is not understood as an internal, private experience, but as a process in which meaning is formed through creative attention and only stabilises as a form of communication in the social space. In this sense, Ana’s painting process can be understood as a concrete example of the kind of creative attention which, according to D’Angelo, not only perceives the world but also co-creates its meaning in the very act of perception (D’Angelo, 2018: 114–115).

PAINTING AS A RELATIONSHIP WITH THE DEAD

In conversations, Ana often emphasises that she does not see herself as a mediator who controls or directs communication, but rather as someone who responds in her own way to a perceived presence. This is clearly evident in her formulation:

They somehow made themselves known and let me know they were there. Then I invite them. Come and tell me. Aha, that’s actually very human. It’s like someone saying to you, “I’d like to come and visit”. And you say, “Come, let’s talk”. (TP 26062025)

In Ana's practice, relational egalitarianism occurs: the artist and the non-human being collaborate in the process of creating a work of art. This is an ontologically horizontal relationship that corresponds to the paradigm of ontological pluralism as proposed by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2019: 298), where different entities co-create the world from their own perspectives, without any necessary hierarchy. It is essential that in such a relationship Ana does not lose her autonomy over her body or the creative process. The perceived presence does not take over her body, but enters her world as a relational interlocutor to whom the author consciously responds and whom she equally creates. She retains control over her body, which functions as an active site of perception, differentiation and translation, not as a passive channel. When asked whether spiritual beings take control of the process or her body during the painting process, she replied:

No! I want to establish a dialogue. I want to understand them. We are equal in terms of existence. They may be big and I may feel small, but we are in dialogue. I am constantly learning to establish dialogue. (TP 2022025)

It is also important that Ana does not enter into relationships with the deceased and other non-human beings merely as a response to their presence, but can also consciously initiate contact herself. In conversations, she emphasises that she does not wait for a spontaneous perception of presence, but decides to enter into a relationship herself: *"I am not made to wait for the muses.³ I have decided not to wait for them because they are always here"* (TP 30042025). This active attitude, in which Ana herself calls upon the beings, is described in the literature on contemporary spiritualism as characteristic of practices in which individuals themselves create the conditions for communication with the dead and other non-human beings. Importantly, however, they do not take control of the process. This distinguishes them from the classical spiritualist models of mediumship in the 19th century, in which communication took place through clearly defined roles and techniques. In these, the medium's body was completely subordinate to spiritual beings. They used it as a passive tool for translating their messages (Gutierrez, 2014: 197–206; Hammer, 2014b: 372–381). Instead, contemporary spiritual practices often emphasise openness in relationships, which is not based on the classical human subordination to a spiritual being or god. Classical views of religion emphasise the importance of worshipping deities, recognising the power of such beings, and seeking their help (Harvey, 2017: 361). Contemporary practices often depart from this.

In this context, painting functions as a way of temporarily placing this indeterminate perception into the process of creating a material artefact – a painting. It is important that the painting is not understood as a representation of a specific being or message, but as a space in which the painting takes shape and in which the relationship can be maintained. This understanding of creative practice is consistent with scholarly analyses of occult practice, which show that material artefacts function as sites of manifestation,

³ In this context, muses are conceived as beings that bring inspiration, but also, in a broader sense, as spiritual beings that enter into a process of communication, the product of which is a painting.

mediation, or encounter rather than as symbolic representations in the classical aesthetic sense (Bogdan, 2014a: 298–299; 2014b: 325–327; also Brower, 2010: 112–148). These studies emphasise that the meaning of a work of art is not predetermined, but is established through use, practice and the relationship in which the work is embedded.

From the perspective of material culture, painting can also be understood as a process in which a material artefact not only reflects a relationship, but actively co-creates it. Miller and Parrot point out that objects are not passive carriers of meaning, but participate in shaping the social and symbolic relationships in which they are created (Miller, Parrot, 2009; see also Knoefl, 2007). In this sense, painting in Ana's practice does not represent the conclusion of the creative process, but rather a kind of stabilisation of the relationship, as the material form allows this relationship – established through the practice of painting – to be further preserved. Ana emphasises that this is in fact the purpose of the painting: through the subsequent viewing of the work, the relationship between humans and spiritual beings can be reactivated. Her paintings also have a reciprocal effect on those who view them. As she herself says: “... *we do not create the painting ourselves, but the painting also influences us ...*” (TP 26062025). The painting is thus not merely the result of a process, but also a factor that can transform the viewer's perception, inner state and relationship to the world.

An analysis of contemporary painting practice thus raises the question of how the relationships between artwork, inspiration and the deceased were understood and organised in other historical contexts. In order to shed light on this relationship in a comparative manner, the following chapter focuses on the painting practices of Georgiana Houghton and Hilma af Klint, in which communication with the beyond was embedded in different religious, social and epistemological frameworks.

PAINTING AS A HISTORICAL PRACTICE OF RELATING TO THE INVISIBLE: SPIRITUALISM, SPIRITISM AND ESOTERIC CONTEXTS

In the 19th century, spiritualism and broader spiritualist practices developed in Europe and around the world as a heterogeneous and dynamic field of religious practices, representations, experiences and discourses that cannot be understood as a coherent religious system with a unified doctrine. Historical studies emphasise that ideas about communication with the deceased, the role of mediums and the nature of the spiritual world developed in constant dialogue with scientific theories, Protestant and other religious traditions, and everyday ideas about the body, perception and nature (Owen, 2004: 1–22; Gutierrez, 2014: 198). Spiritualism thus functioned as an open field of experimentation in which religious, scientific and experiential languages overlapped and transformed each other.

Mediumship played a central role in these practices. Séances, automatic writing, drawing, playing instruments and other techniques of expression were understood not only as ways of communicating with the beyond, but also as forms of access to different levels of knowledge. The medium was often conceived as a body-instrument through which spiritual beings operated, whereby the individual authority of the medium was

consciously relativised. In this mode of communication, humans were subordinate to non-human actors (Gutierrez, 2014: 200).

Spiritualist practices did not exist in isolation, but were intertwined with other occult and esoteric currents. Theosophy also played an important role, offering more systematic cosmologies, hierarchies of spiritual beings, and concepts of spiritual development. Olav Hammer emphasises that theosophy does not represent a unified belief system, but rather a hybrid field of ideas that combines elements of Western esoteric tradition, Eastern religions, evolutionary theories, and contemporary scientific language, with these elements often being selectively and situationally transferred in practice (Hammer, 2014a: 250–272).

Mesmerism was also a precursor to spiritualism. Adam Crabtree shows that mesmerism was not merely a proto-scientific theory of animal magnetism, but above all a practical framework for exploring altered states of consciousness, bodily sensibility, and relational forms of action. It was precisely mesmeric practices that contributed to the understanding of trance as a state in which perception changes, which had a long-term influence on the spiritualist techniques of mediumship, automatic writing, painting and the like (Crabtree, 2015: 188–205). Katy Gutierrez and Angela Voss also write about changes in the perceptual regime in the context of Western esotericism, emphasising that in these practices trance does not mean a departure from perception, but rather its redirection. It is a shift in the way of perceiving the world, where the boundaries between the visible and the invisible, the material and the immaterial are temporarily rearranged, and perception becomes open to different forms of presence and action of forces (Gutierrez, 2014: 200–202; Voss, 2014: 582–583). Such changes in the perceptual regime are not understood as exceptional, but as culturally and practically grounded techniques that can be developed through repetition and discipline.

Mediumistic séances and trances played a key role in the development of spiritualism. With their help, spiritualism also established itself distinctly in the visual domain. In addition to painting, new techniques of photography – and later film – made it possible to perceive the dead, who were captured in photographs or on film, whereas previously they could not be perceived by the human eye alone. In this respect, photographs did not function merely as representations, but as material traces or evidence of the presence of non-human beings (Bauduin, 2014: 433–434). A similar development took place in the practice of painting. With the help of mediumistic séances and automatic painting, the messages of the dead and other non-human beings began to be transferred directly into paintings. In this context, artistic practices were inextricably linked to religious activities and perceptual techniques. Mediumistic séances and automatic painting were also specifically based on gender. Although this article does not focus on the question of the significance of gender in past or contemporary practices, it is important to at least partially highlight it. Gender does not appear as a separate topic in the material and historical discussions, but rather as a recurring feature of practices and their practitioners. According to the logic of the time, women were believed to possess qualities that enabled them to communicate with the deceased. They were thought to be more unstable, to carry a negative electrical charge, to have less stable nerves, and so on. As Gutierrez points out,

this role of women was made possible by specific ideas about the female body and its perception as more susceptible to spiritual influences. Spiritualism thus enabled women to be visible and active, while at the same time often framing their authorship as mediation rather than autonomous creation (Gutierrez, 2014: 201–203). This ambivalence is a key starting point for understanding the painting practices of Georgiana Houghton and Hilma af Klint, which will be discussed below.

GEORGIANA HOUGHTON AND “SPIRITUAL DRAWING”

The painting practice of Georgiana Houghton (1814–1884) represents one of the clearest examples of how, in the 19th century, automatic painting was linked to mediumistic practices and understood as a direct form of communication with the dead and other non-human beings. Houghton worked in the London spiritualist milieu of the second half of the 19th century, where séances and mediumship were established practices, and painting gradually became established as one of the legitimate techniques of spiritual communication.

Her work was not based on aesthetic autonomy or personal expression, but on the logic of spiritualism. In accordance with spiritualist logic, the artist saw herself as a channel through which the dead and other non-human beings operated. Houghton herself did not understand her drawings and paintings as her own creations, but as the result of the work of spirits, angels and deceased persons who guided her hand. As Rachel Oberster shows, Houghton labelled her drawings as *spiritual drawings* and accompanied them with extensive notes explaining their genesis, the symbolic meaning of colours and lines, and the identity of the beings who were supposed to have participated in their creation (Oberster, 2006). These notes are not mere additions, but an integral part of her painting practice, as they reveal her understanding of painting as a process in which human authorship gives way to spiritual guidance.

A key element of Houghton's practice was the idea of the body as an instrument. In line with broader spiritualist ideas, the artist was understood in the creative process as a medium who had to renounce her own will and control. Simon Grand and Marco Pasi point out that this attitude was closely linked to the understanding of artistic creativity as something that does not originate from the individual, but from an external, invisible source connected to the spiritual world (Grand, Pasi, 2016: 12–15). In this context, the loss of control over the body, especially over the hand when painting, was considered a prerequisite for authentic communication with the dead and other non-human beings.

It is important to note that Houghton was not only a painter, but also an interpreter and theorist of her own practice. In her books *Evenings at Home and Spiritual Séance* (1882) and *Chronicles of the Photographs of Spiritual Beings* (1881), she argues that even the great artists of the past were guided by spiritual helpers. In her understanding, artistic creativity is the result of the creator's receptivity and humility, who is able to renounce his own self and surrender to spiritual guidance. The key point here is that the authorship of works of art was attributed to deceased family members, angels or spirits, and often

to the spirits of former painters, especially Renaissance painters (Courtauld Institute of Art, 2016). This is evidenced by Georgiana's text from her book published in 1881:

.../ I believe that most of the painters of olden times who devoted themselves to sacred art were assisted in their labours by invisible friends, and would receive from them intimations as to the true likenesses of those whom they desired to portray, so that the more they could give themselves up to those intuitions, laying aside their own selfhood, the more likely they would be to have the reality granted to them as their ideal of the saint or martyr whom they wished to represent. We know that they prayerfully sought for inspiration, and according to their own true receptivity would be the response yielded. (Houghton, 1881: 238)

Such a conception of artistic creation establishes a clear hierarchy between the human and the non-human: the otherworld or spirits are the bearers of knowledge and creative power, while humans are merely their temporary intermediaries.

Georgiana Houghton's position also raises a broader theoretical question about the relationship between spiritualist and other occult movements (e.g. the mystical order of the Rose Croix, etc.) and the development of modern visual art (see also Safarova, 2007). Tessel M. Bauduin has written more on this subject, drawing attention to the question of the "influence" of spiritualism and related practices on visual art. Bauduin emphasises that defining "influence" in this context is extremely problematic. Although it can be shown that many artists moved in occult circles, were familiar with spiritualist practices or were in contact with specific mediums and theosophical authors, the question remains open as to the extent to which occultism actually played a constitutive role in their art. Even where a connection can be discerned, it is unclear whether it is a matter of intellectual inspiration, iconographic or narrative content, or a direct influence on the formal and stylistic elements of the artwork. Additional complexity is introduced by the pronounced occult eclecticism of many artists, who often drew simultaneously from different, sometimes even contradictory esoteric traditions (Bauduin, 2015: 433–435).

In this sense, Houghton is not merely an example of the "influence" of spiritualism on art, but rather a radically different understanding of her own artistic practice. For her, spiritualism is not an external conceptual framework, but rather the ontological and epistemological foundation of her creation. It is not that spiritualist beliefs shaped her style, but rather that her own interpretation of painting is understood as a form of communication with the dead and other non-human beings. Authorship is thus shifted from the human subject to non-human actors from the outset.

This shift allows us to move on to another example, that of the painter Hilma af Klint, in whose work communication with the dead and non-human beings was organised and documented even more systematically. The transition from Houghton to af Klint is thus not merely a chronological continuation, but an escalation of the logic in which the artwork is understood as a material record of the actions of non-human actors, rather than as an expression of the artist's inner subjectivity. Af Klint herself referred to her painting as "visual dictates".

HILMA AF KLINT: MEDIUMSHIP, PAINTING AND THE PROBLEM OF MODERNIST SUBJECTIVITY

Hilma af Klint (1862–1944) is today considered one of the earliest pioneers of abstract painting. At the time her works were created, however, they were considered controversial and were not recognised as a contribution to art history or to modernist innovation in painting. Her painting practice stemmed from her intense involvement in spiritualist and theosophical circles. Despite the fact that theosophical, spiritualist and related principles were often mutually exclusive, artists frequently combined elements of both (Bauduin, 2015: 435).

A decisive turning point in her spiritualist painting, similar to that of Georgiana Houghton, was the death of her sister Hermine. After her death, af Klint systematically devoted herself to spiritual practices, theosophy, the works of Helena Blavatsky and, later, to her contacts with Rudolf Steiner. In this context, she established herself as a medium and began to develop related approaches to painting (McNab, 2021).

Af Klint consistently described her own painting experience as a process in which she did not act from her “inner self” but as a mediator of an external, non-human source. Her statement clearly articulates this relationship:

“The pictures were painted directly through me, without any preliminary drawings and with great force. I had no idea what the paintings were supposed to depict; nevertheless, I worked swiftly and surely, without changing a single brushstroke.” (Müller, Adams, n.d.)

The emphasis on speed, the absence of corrections, and the lack of knowledge about the meaning of the images indicate a conscious suspension of artistic control and intentional decision-making.

This understanding of painting is also confirmed by her diary entries, in which af Klint clearly distinguishes between her own role and that of her spiritual guides. In an entry dated 7 November 1906, she writes: “Amaliel⁴ sketches the outline, then Hilma must paint” (Dichter et al., 2007: 166). Elsewhere, this process is described as a process in which the artist paints automatically in response to instructions from spiritual guides who determine both the form and content of the work (Johnson, 2022). Painting is understood here as a ritualised practice of mediation, in which the human body is an instrument of spiritual actors.

It is precisely this aspect of af Klint’s practice that is at the centre of Branden W. Joseph’s analysis, which shows that her work systematically undermines the fundamental assumptions of modernist art history. As Joseph notes, the modernist canon is based on the ideal of an autonomous, self-reflective and intentional creative subject who produces artistic work consciously, rationally and independently of external forces. Af Klint’s practice, however, is structurally incompatible with this model. Her paintings, which have raised numerous questions due to their early development of abstract painting, were

⁴ Amaliel is the name of one of the angels.

not created as an expression of individual will or aesthetic experimentation, but as works *commissioned* and guided by the invisible world, often understood as part of a spiritual task or mission (Joseph, 2017: 119–120).

This inconsistency also has a clear gender dimension. As a woman in the patriarchal world of painting, she saw herself as someone who surrendered her own intentionality and authorship and transferred it to the spiritual world. In doing so, she gained space for her painting in a male-dominated environment, while at the same time establishing an alternative model of creativity and redefining the world of painting. She did not follow the aesthetic principles of painting, nor did she seek to be included in the broader artistic discourse or aim consciously to contribute to the development of abstract painting. Thus, the painting of both af Klint and Houghton does not follow the logic of control (over the body, the process, etc.), but rather the logic of “obedience”: the artist renounces authorship, control and interpretation and allows knowledge and form to emerge through her, rather than from her. Paradoxically, by renouncing themselves, these painters achieve a redefinition of the world of painting.

CONCLUSION

A comparison of the spiritualist painting practices of Georgiana Houghton and Hilma af Klint with the contemporary artistic practices of the painter Ana reveals important epistemological and ontological shifts in the understanding of the relationship between the living and the dead as well as in conceptions of artistic creativity. The central differences focus on two analytical dimensions, namely the function of the body and the structure of the relationship between ontological agents.

In spiritualistic practices, as embodied by Georgiana Houghton and Hilma af Klint, the artist’s body acts as a passive medium. The body becomes an interface temporarily occupied by spirits, who produce an artistic artefact through its hand. This principle of operation denies the artist autonomy and reduces her to an instrument of spiritual manifestation. The body enters a phase of liminality, where it is emptied of content and subordinated to the spiritual world. This model presupposes a hierarchy in which the spirit is ontologically and epistemologically superior to the living: knowledge, art and inspiration come from the transcendent world, while the living human being is merely a channel for their transmission.

In contrast, in Ana’s contemporary painting practice, the body is no longer a mediator but sensorially analyses and generates perceptions. Through breathing practices and environmental attunement with nature, a state is established in which the artist is not subject to another being but enters into dialogue with it. The body is no longer merely a channel for mediation, but a means for perception, translation and transformation. The key process here is the transformation of subtle perceptions in the form of vibrations, sound, perceptions of condensation and other internal perceptions. These perceptions are then transformed into a visual code that has an artistic form and at the same time functions as a connecting channel between worlds.

From the perspective of the structure of the relationship between the living and the dead and other non-human beings, the spiritualist model is clearly hierarchical: the authorship of the artwork is attributed to a spiritual being, while the human author withdraws from the process. In Ana's contemporary practice, however, there is relational egalitarianism: the artist and the invisible being collaborate in the process of creation. Such a relationship can be understood as ontologically horizontal and can be approximated to the aforementioned paradigm of ontological pluralism in Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2019), where the world is created through the coexistence and intertwining of the perspectives of different entities, without a necessary hierarchical arrangement.

In this light, the artistic act also takes on a new definition. In the historical spiritualist model, the creative act is derived from a supernatural source and represents a form of revelation. In the contemporary case, however, it is a communicative process, the result of which is not a gift or inspiration, but a translation. A work of art is a product of semiosis that arises at the intersection or transition between two code systems: one that belongs to the dead (or other non-human beings) and one that belongs to human perception and cultural articulation.

On this basis, the painting no longer functions as a fetishistic object, but as a *conduit* – a kind of translation channel (Degh, 2001: 61; also Knoefl, 2007) – through which a liminal space is formed. This space not only enables communication between worlds, but also generates new knowledge. This knowledge is not exclusively independent of either the living or the dead, but arises in their relationship or contact. Painting thus does not come from the other world, but from spaces somewhere in between – that is from the space of contact and transition connecting the living and the dead, or other non-human beings.

A comparative analysis reveals a fundamental shift: from the epistemology of trance found in the historical mediumistic practices of Houghton and af Klint to the epistemology of relationship found in the contemporary case of the painter Ana. This change does not merely signify a different understanding of the artistic process, but signals a possible broader shift in contemporary spiritual practices. This shift is based on a move away from domination and control towards cooperation between actors. More specifically, it is a shift from passive channelling to active translation, and from revelation to interpersonal synthesis.

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STATEMENT ON RESEARCH DATA MANAGEMENT

This article is based on research data stored in the author's archive and available to others upon reasonable request.

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SLIKANJE KOT SREDSTVO ZA SPORAZUMEVANJE Z MRTVIMI IN DRUGIMI NEČLOVEŠKIMI BITJI

Članek obravnava slikanje kot prakso vzpostavljanja in vzdrževanja odnosov z mrtvimi in drugimi nečloveškimi bitji v sodobnem in zgodovinskem kontekstu. Izhaja iz analitičnega okvira vernakularne religije, ki omogoča razumevanje religioznih izkušenj ne kot zaprtih in normativno določenih verovanjskih sistemov, temveč kot dinamičnih, pogosto protislovnih praks, ki se oblikujejo v konkretnem življenjskem kontekstu. V tem okviru odnosi z mrtvimi niso obravnavani kot vnaprej dane predstave o onstranstvu, temveč kot izkustva, ki se vzpostavljajo skozi telesno zaznavo, učenje in ustvarjalno prakso.

Osrednji del članka temelji na etnografski raziskavi slikarske prakse sodobne slovenske slikarke Ane. Njeno slikanje se razvija kot postopno učenje zaznavanja prisotnosti mrtvih in drugih nečloveških bitij, pri čemer komunikacija ni razumljena kot rezultat posebnih tehnik klicanja ali spremenjenega stanja zavesti, temveč kot proces ugaševanja telesne zaznave in pozornosti. Ana svojih izkušenj ne opisuje v smislu posedenosti ali izgube nadzora nad telesom, temveč kot dialoški odnos z mrtvimi, v katerem ostaja avtorica dejavna in samorefleksivna. Telo v tem procesu deluje kot mesto zaznavanja, razlikovanja in prevajanja telesnih zaznav in občutij v slikarski jezik.

V nadaljevanju je Anina sodobna praksa postavljena v primerjalni odnos z zgodovinskima primeroma slikark Georgiane Houghton in Hilme af Klint. V obeh primerih je slikanje umeščeno v kontekst spiritualističnih in teozofskih praks 19. in začetka 20. stoletja, kjer je umetniško ustvarjanje razumljeno kot oblika pasivne mediacije. Umetniško telo je v teh praksah pojmovano kot instrument, ki izgubi kontrolo in skozi katerega delujejo duhovna bitja. Avtorstvo in nadzor nad ustvarjalnim procesom sta pripisana mrtvim in/ali drugim duhovnim bitjem. Takšno razumevanje slikanja vzpostavlja jasno hierarhičen odnos med živimi in mrtvimi ter temelji na modelu razodetja in telesne podrejenosti.

Primerjalna analiza pokaže pomemben premik v razumevanju odnosa med umetniško prakso, telesom in duhovnimi bitji. Medtem ko so v spiritualističnih modelih prevladovali hierarhični odnosi in pasivna vloga umetnika, Anina sodobna

praksa kaže na relacijski, dialoški in bolj egalitaren način vzpostavljanja stika. Slikanje v tem kontekstu ni sredstvo prenosa sporočil iz onstranstva, temveč prostor, v katerem se odnos med živimi in mrtvimi šele oblikuje, interpretira in začasno stabilizira.

Primerjava zgodovinskih in sodobnih praks pokaže tudi premik v razumevanju liminalnosti. V klasičnih spiritualističnih praksah 19. stoletja je bila faza liminalnosti vezana predvsem na telo medija, ki je v stanju transa ali posedovanosti začasno izgubilo avtonomijo ter delovalo kot vmesni »prostor« med svetovi. V sodobni slikarski praksi, kakršno predstavlja Ana, pa telo ne vstopa več v stanje telesne podrejenosti ali izpraznjenosti, temveč ohranja nadzor in refleksivnost. Liminalno funkcijo v tem primeru prevzame slikarsko delo samo: slika deluje kot prostor prehoda, v katerem se odnos med živimi in mrtvimi lahko vzpostavi, ohrani in celo kasneje ponovno aktualizira. Liminalnost se tako premakne s telesa na materializirano umetniško delo, ki postane nosilec odnosa in mesto njegove začasne stabilizacije.

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Modern-Day Kaidan: Japanese Horror Storytelling as Popular Culture

Aljaž Mesner

This article explores the history and modern developments of the Japanese horror storytelling tradition known as *kaidan*. It traces its origins from the first period of mass popularity in the Edo period, through the scepticism that permeated the social climate of the Meiji period, to the 20th century, when the introduction of film and television enabled *kaidan* to diversify into different media. The 1990s are examined as an especially transformative period when *kaidan* entered the mainstream through the popularity of J-Horror, TV shows and dedicated books and magazines that invited readers to experience the narratives firsthand by venturing out to haunted locations. Along this rich horror mediascape, oral storytelling also experienced a resurgence, taking the form of competitions, live performances and themed bars hosting *kaidan* events. The author explores these phenomena using media analysis, field observations and interviews.

KEYWORDS: Japan, storytelling, legends, *kaidan*, horror, media, popular culture

Članek raziskuje zgodovino in sodobni razvoj japonske tradicije pripovedovanja grozljivih zgodb, imenovanih *kaidan*. Predstavi zgodovino te tradicije pripovedništva od obdobja množične priljubljenosti v obdobju Edo, prek skepticizma, ki je prežemal družbeno klimo v obdobju Meiji, do 20. stoletja, ko je uvedba filma in televizije omogočila, da se je žanr grozljivk razvil v različnih medijih. Devetdeseta leta so obravnavana kot posebej prelomno obdobje, v katerem je *kaidan* vstopil v popularno kulturo skozi J-Horror, televizijske oddaje ter specializirane knjige in revije, ki so bralce nagovarjale, naj pripovedi doživijo neposredno z obiskovanjem strašljivih lokacij. Ob tej bogati medijski krajini je tudi klasično pripovedništvo doživelo preporod v obliki tekmovanj, nastopov v živo in tematskih barov, ki gostijo *kaidan* dogodke. Avtor raziskuje te fenomene prek analize medijev, terenskih opazovanj in intervjujev.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: Japonska, pripovedništvo, povedke, *kaidan*, grozljivka, mediji, popularna kultura

INTRODUCTION

In 2011, Japan was devastated by a deadly tsunami in which many people lost their lives or loved ones. Seeking ways to help survivors overcome their grief, Jikisai Minami, a Buddhist priest, organised gatherings that provided people with an opportunity to share stories of ghostly encounters with their deceased relatives. Through these meetings, survivors were able to obtain at least some degree of closure. This was not, however,

a new phenomenon. For centuries, the Japanese have been telling and retelling stories of the supernatural, some of which have been passed down through the generations. Although their popularity has fluctuated over time, their presence can be seen in many aspects of Japanese culture and contemporary popular media. According to Minami, these stories also contain an important existential element:

This is partly where our appetite for ghost stories comes from /.../ Good ones point us towards a well-founded anxiety about the stability of our own existence. These do not necessarily induce a fear of being close to death or of our existence coming imminently to an end, but rather indicate something suspiciously thin or fragile or insubstantial about that existence to begin with. (Harding, 2018)

In Japan, ghost stories are known as *kaidan* – a compound word consisting of the Chinese characters for weird or strange (kai 怪) and tales (dan 談). The term can thus be defined as “a discussion or passing down of tales of the weird, strange or mysterious” (Davisson, 2015: 149) or simply as “a narrative of the strange” (Reider, 2001: 80). In the context of folklore studies, we can consider them as legends, due to their anonymity, constant variation and repeated retellings. Regardless of the extent to which they contain factual information, they have the ability to trigger a rich and complex set of deeply shared cultural values in their audiences (Iwasaka, Toelken, 1994: 71). As legends, *kaidan* are therefore “orally performed stories which relate to something that actually happened, an event which occurred in the same world in which the teller and listener live” (ibid.: 86).

This paper will delve into the origins of *kaidan* and its development over the past 400 years, exploring its connections with other cultural forms, such as theatre, literature and film. The examples provided show that the horror genre has been – and continues to be – present in Japanese popular culture. After the decline of oral storytelling, the horror genre was most frequently portrayed through media such as popular literature and film, the latter dubbed J-Horror, and reaching a peak of popularity in the 1990s. Since the turn of the 21st century, *kaidan* has regained popularity in its original storytelling form and is once again performed before live audiences – albeit within modernised contexts that include live bars, competitions and an online presence.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND SOURCES

The first part of the paper is based on historical and academic sources and shows the origins of horror storytelling and its evolution across successive periods of Japanese history up until the 1990s, which marked a turning point in Japanese horror culture. The period from the 1990s to the present day is explored not only through existing scholarly literature, but also through an analysis of Japanese media sources, websites, forums and published interviews. These materials were translated and contextualised together with personal narratives from interlocutors who grew up during that era and are now part of the current

horror scene. While the text does not adhere to a specific theoretical framework, respective sections provide concrete examples supported by concepts from folklore studies such as performance theory, ostension and legend tripping, in order to situate kaidan within the folkloric genre of legends.

The idea to explore kaidan in more detail emerged during two research visits to Japan in 2025, originally undertaken to conduct fieldwork on Japanese Buddhism – a tradition that, as will be shown, bears certain connections with horror storytelling. During this fieldwork, I observed not only that horror is present in multiple facets of Japanese popular culture, but also that the tradition of telling horror stories is still alive today. It was through a chance meeting with one of my interlocutors that I was introduced to the contemporary kaidan scene.

I was walking through Kichijōji, a Tokyo neighbourhood known for its alternative culture, when I passed a venue in front of which stood a lifelike doll of a girl in a kimono. The event had just finished, and the man standing next to the doll was thanking visitors as they exited, exchanging a few words and business cards with many of them. After the crowd had dispersed, I decided to approach him out of curiosity. He had quite an intriguing appearance: long hair, glasses, and an all-black outfit, with Buddhist prayer beads around his neck and wrists. It turned out he is a *kaidanshi* (怪談師), a teller of kaidan, who performs under the stage name Megane Oji-chan.¹

He told me that he came to Tokyo for this event but that he lives in Osaka, where he runs a horror-themed bar that hosts similar events, and he suggested I come visit when I am in Osaka. We kept in touch through social media, and when I finally came to his bar a month later, he introduced me to another storyteller, Napoli. With their help and through some networking on social media, I was able to gather further information regarding the contemporary kaidan scene. All the interlocutors included in this paper gave their full consent for the publication of the information they shared, as well as for the use of their names. It should be noted, however, that Megane Oji-chan and Napoli are stage names under which they perform within the kaidan scene and online.



Figure 1: Doll Yukiko in front of horror storytelling venue (Photo by the author, 22.3.2025)

¹ Literally Uncle Glasses, *megane* (眼鏡) are glasses, which he does in fact wear, and Oji-chan is an endearing term for an adult male, akin to “uncle”.

To supplement the interviews included in this paper, I took photographs, reviewed promotional materials and posters, and ultimately conducted digital ethnography after coming back from Japan. The language barrier was a significant obstacle in the field, as events and information were exclusively in Japanese. Not having seen any foreigners visiting Megane's bar or the events I attended, and given the global popularity of J-Horror, I suspect it is the language barrier that has kept the kaidan scene relatively closed, with "outsiders" remaining uncommon for the time being. My Japanese is decent enough to be able to hold a conversation, but my reading ability is limited, which meant that I had to resort to anglophone literature and secondary sources for the historical overview of kaidan.

Despite trying my best to include research by Japanese scholars as well, it is neither within the scope of this paper nor within my competence to present the current state of kaidan scholarship in Japan. I therefore refrained from attempting to translate academic literature written in Japanese, as doing so without adequate language ability would likely be counterproductive. However, I invested considerable effort in translating blog posts, websites and other online materials, as well as the interviews, which I conducted mostly in Japanese. Follow-ups with the interlocutors via social media messaging also helped clarify some details and nuances which would otherwise have been lost in face-to-face conversations alone.

Despite these limitations, I hope this article provides an overview of the horror storytelling tradition in Japan and, especially in its final part addressing its present state, serves as a stepping stone for further research.

HISTORY OF JAPANESE ORAL STORYTELLING AND ITS POPULARISATION IN THE EDO PERIOD

Stories concerning strange and mysterious occurrences predate the term kaidan, which only came into use to describe such narratives in the 17th century (Reider, 2001: 80). The earliest records of such tales come from collections of Buddhist stories called *setsuwa*, compiled in the Heian period (794–1185), such as the *Nihon ryōiki* and *Konjaku Monogatarishū*. The latter consists of over a thousand tales and is widely regarded as the first work of kaidan, even though it did not bear that designation at the time (Davisson, 2015: 30). Beyond literature, elements of horror and the grotesque were also present in the visual arts from at least the 9th century onwards, particularly in the form of hanging scrolls and handscrolls, brought to Japan with the spread of Buddhism (Negrych, 2021: 66), which depicted images of hell and supernatural beings. However, these earliest examples circulated primarily among Buddhist monks and the elite, rather than among the common people (De Antoni, 2017: 152). It was not until the Edo period (1603–1868), a time of relative peace after centuries of civil war, that conditions enabled such narratives to enter the vernacular sphere through the medium of oral storytelling (Davisson, 2015: 27).

As the commercial economy and trade developed, urban centres came into increasing contact with rural areas and vice versa. Travelling merchants, performers, priests and pilgrims were just some of the agents of transmission, spreading entertaining tales from

one place to another. They drew not only from recent events and local rumours, but also adapted them from the aforementioned collections of Buddhist literature and art. Buddhism played an integral role in the early dissemination of kaidan, with monks employing such stories as didactic tools (Donovan, 2024: 6). Buddhist settings and characters have remained recurring themes in kaidan to this day:

Buddhist temples are common settings for ghost stories. Especially temples with cemeteries, since they are strongly associated with the dead. There are also many depictions where Buddhist priests perform exorcisms, or even where priests themselves appear as supernatural beings. Priests are imagined to possess spiritual power, but since they are also still in training, there is an idea that they could become either good or evil. In any case, in Japan, it is often Buddhism that plays the role of giving rise to, dispelling, or pacifying unseen spiritual beings. (Megane Oji-chan, 2025)

As kaidan expanded beyond its Buddhist origins and gained popularity during the Edo period, its themes began to diversify and were subject to secularisation. The narratives increasingly took the form of entertaining stories covering a wide range of topics from the strange and scary to the funny, silly and exotic (Reider, 2000: 266). This surge in popularity also created a demand for professional storytellers, of whom ever greater narrative skills were expected:

In an oral tradition, the story is supplemented by the tellers' gestures, intonation, facial expressions, and the teller's ability to spontaneously interact with the audience. It was thus a true interactive experience. If the storytellers were so inclined, they could tailor their stories to accommodate the varying aptitudes, attitudes, and atmosphere of each audience. (Reider, 2001: 81)

ELEMENTS OF HORROR IN JAPANESE TRADITIONAL PERFORMING ARTS: RAKUGO, NOH AND KABUKI

This kind of storytelling is closely connected to the theatrical art of *rakugo*, a popular form of commoner entertainment in the Edo period (Figal, 1999: 26). This is typically a one-man play in which the storyteller, seated on a cushion before the audience, uses nothing more than his voice, gestures and a folding fan to lead the audience through an imaginative story (Davisson, 2015: 92).

One of the most famous rakugo storytellers and writers was San'yūtei Enchō. Later in life, he became associated with the Zenshoan temple, where he exclusively performed kaidan. His legacy remains important: to this day master storytellers gather in this temple each summer to pay respects to him and share supernatural tales (Iwasaka, Toelken, 1994: 25). Additionally, his private collection of ghost paintings – which he used to study their gestures and themes – is exhibited every year in August during the Obon season, the time

of year when, according to Japanese tradition, the spirits of the ancestors return to the land of the living.

In addition to rakugo storytelling, *kaidan* – in one form or another – became present in practically every Japanese performing art. Noh plays, for example, constitute a symbolic encounter between the living and the dead (Suzuki, 2023: 103–105). Like *kaidan*, Noh draws inspiration from Buddhist tales, often featuring monks in dialogue with supernatural entities. Noh plays were originally directed at those spirits who could be pacified through the combined effects of storytelling, imitation and spirit possession on stage (Swift, 2011: 2). Additionally, in the context of commoner entertainment during the Edo period, adaptations of *kaidan* into kabuki plays further consolidated their place in popular culture. Several famous *kaidan* from that period are still being performed and reinterpreted today (Donovan, 2024: 5).

Beyond the entertainment industry, people also began organising informal gatherings known as *kaidankai* (怪談会), at which people would share stories with each other. A specific format of storytelling gained popularity: a parlour game called *hyakumonogatari kaidankai*, meaning “a gathering of 100 weird tales” (Davisson, 2015: 34). Although it is not known exactly who invented the game and when (Reider, 2000: 267), we know that it was initially enjoyed by the aristocratic and warrior classes, but soon spread among the common people and was eventually known and played all over Japan, providing a forum for exhibiting and exchanging mysterious narratives (Foster, 2009: 52).

During such gatherings, a group of people would take turns telling stories until a total of one hundred had been told, in an attempt to induce supernatural phenomena. After each story, the storyteller would blow out one of the hundred candles illuminating the room, so that the space grew progressively darker. Finally, when the last story had been told and the last candle extinguished, total darkness descended upon the participants. It was rumoured that this moment created the possibility of contact with an otherworldly presence – although in practice the storytelling was usually stopped before reaching that point, as a precaution.

COLLECTIONS OF HORROR STORIES IN EDO PERIOD POPULAR LITERATURE

As *kaidan* established its presence in the daily lives of common people, the public developed an insatiable appetite for it, and storytellers were constantly on the lookout for new stories that would impress and shock their audiences. Demand was high and collections of *kaidan* called *kaidanshū* (怪談集) began to be published, designed to provide stories for the game. Their quality varied considerably, however, as they were “produced quickly to meet a need rather than satisfy any sort of artistry” (Davisson, 2015: 35). The *kaidan* in such collections were frequently very short, merely recounting some strange occurrence that happened.

The adoption of the printing press was one of the key factors that made *kaidan* literature possible (Reider, 2000: 86; De Antoni, 2017: 152). One of the first *kaidanshū* to be

printed in large numbers was the *Inga Monogatari*,² written in 1660 by the monk Suzuki Shōsan (Davisson, 2015: 32). Like his predecessors, he aimed to use the supernatural as a tool for moral instruction. In addition to Buddhist motifs, authors also drew on Chinese sources and Japanese folklore (Reider, 2001: 90). All three of these influences can be clearly seen in the literary work that marked the zenith of the kaidan literary genre – Ueda Akinari’s *Ugetsu Monogatari* (*Tales of Moonlight and Rain*) from 1776. His collection transformed kaidan from simple orally derived tales into literary narrative fiction (Reider, 2001: 94), and it continues to exert considerable influence on Japanese literature (Davisson, 2015: 138).

Although the popularity of gatherings declined in the middle of the eighteenth century, the books remained in print – kaidan stories were as popular as ever, and publication numbers reached their peak during this period (Reider, 2000: 267). According to a researcher of Japanese literature and folklore, Noriko Reider, we can identify four dimensions of kaidan’s popularity at the time: “(1) fascination with the grotesque, (2) plausible explanations for unexplained common occurrences, (3) attraction to the exotic, and (4) social commentary” (Reider, 2000: 269).

In summary, unconventional and grotesque themes held particular appeal for people living in Edo Japan, a highly structured and rigid class society. Furthermore, readers found in these stories explanations for inexplicable events that occurred in their lives. The themes kaidan explored were novel and those originating from China were seen as especially exotic. Finally, due to the strict censorship laws, kaidan functioned as a tool for revealing political and societal issues (Reider, 2000: 276). Kaidan narratives also highlight the particular relationship between the individual and the community in traditional Japanese culture, often dramatising moments in which individual desire is set against social or cultural demands (Iwasaka, Toelken, 1994: 65).

THE MEIJI RESTORATION AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF FOLKLORE STUDIES IN JAPAN

The Meiji period (1868–1912) marked a great shift in Japanese society, which opened up to the outside world after a period of isolation of more than two hundred years. Western technology, knowledge and ideas were introduced to Japan, leading many Japanese intellectuals to reinterpret beliefs in the supernatural as unrealistic or incompatible with modernity. San’yūtei Enchō, whose career as a storyteller coincided with this period, lamented that “the teachers of the Enlightenment thought that the supernatural was a product of the mind, and kaidan an extension of that neuropathy” (Reider, 2000: 278). The Meiji government even initiated an official programme banishing all references to superstitions and the supernatural, treating belief in the worlds depicted in kaidan as mental illness, as officials expressed concerns about the public’s obsession with such

² Eng.: Tales of Cause and Effect.

entertainment (Davisson, 2015: 142). However, these efforts were largely in vain as the public continued to believe in and consume kaidan.

In parallel with these efforts to suppress kaidan, there was also widespread interest in it among literati and scholars. This coincided with the development of the discipline of *minzokugaku* (民俗学) – folklore studies – as a means of recovering national traditions in response to the perceived loss of cultural identity resulting from westernisation and modernisation (Suter, 2019: 132). A major milestone in the field is usually attributed to Kunio Yanagita's hugely popular 1912 publication *Tōno Monogatari* (*The Tales of Tono*). The work contains 119 short tales, each describing a different encounter set in the Tōno region of northern Japan. Yanagita travelled to the region and compiled the narratives as recounted to him by the local folklorist Kizen Sasaki, subsequently rewriting them in a more literary style (Thurgill, 2023: 438).

Another prominent collector of ghostly tales and Yanagita's contemporary was Lafcadio Hearn, who later became a naturalised Japanese citizen and adopted the name Koizumi Yakumo, under which his collections were published in Japan (Figal, 1999: 221). The most famous of these was *Kwaidan: Stories and Studies of Strange Things*. Around the same time, translations of Western fantastic and supernatural literature began to be published, forming a literary genre known as *gensō bungaku* (幻想文学) – a literal translation of the English term “fantastic literature” (Shimokusu, 2019: 219).

The renewed popularity of kaidan in the Meiji period was affirmed by the founding of the Kaidankai (Ghost Story Association) in 1908 – a literary group dedicated to the research and retelling of supernatural tales circulating among the populace. The group was led by Mizuno Yōshū, a colleague of Yanagita and Sasaki (Figal, 1999: 167). Its gatherings provided a venue for academic discussion not only of kaidan, but of supernatural beliefs in general and resulted in multiple publications.

ADAPTATIONS OF KAIKAN FOR THE SILVER SCREEN

Around the beginning of the twentieth century, not long after the introduction of film, the Japanese film industry began producing horror films, adapting classic kaidan stories for the silver screen. Filmmakers were particularly fond of the figure Oiwa from the popular kabuki play *Yotsuya Kaidan*, which was first adapted to film in 1912 (Davisson, 2015: 83) and continues to receive new cinematic versions to this day (Reider, 2001: 82). The play has acquired something of a cult status, partly because multiple film productions have encountered problems both on and off set, including disappearing reels, fires, mechanical failures, and accidents involving cast members. Owing to this reputed “curse,” it has become an unwritten rule for actors to visit Oiwa's shrine in Sugamo, Tokyo, to pay their respects. Even today, her grave and the nearby Shinto shrine are constantly adorned with devotional offerings of candles and flowers (Ross, 2020). During my visit to the site, a woman was offering prayers in front of the well, and many different charms were available for purchase at the temple office – proving that the cult of Oiwa is still very much alive today.



Figure 2: Oiwa-Inari Yōun-ji Temple (Photo by the author, 24.3.2025)

During the war period, horror film production was brought to a halt, specifically by the 1939 Film Act, which discouraged “vulgar” subjects such as ghosts and monsters (Crandol, 2015: 156). Even after the war, cinema remained subject to censorship under the American occupation, banning themes such as karmic revenge, etc. (Donovan, 2024: 9). When the occupation ended, however, film production resumed, and the post-war period from the 1950s to the 1960s is regarded as a golden age of Japanese horror film. During this time, a genre known as *kaidan eiga*³ emerged (Davisson, 2015: 143), with films such as *Kwaidan* (1964), *Onibaba* (1964), and *Kuroneko* (1968), all of which are still regarded as classics. Despite the use of modern technologies and production techniques, these adaptations generally remained faithful to their *kaidan* sources.

The 1970s were characterised by the so-called “boom of the occult” (オカルトブーム), in which Western horror played a major role. For example, *The Exorcist* (1974) was a massive hit in Japan (De Antoni, 2017: 153). In a sense, this resembles the fascination with Western fantastic literature in the early 1900s, which also coincided with a renewed appreciation for *kaidan*. In the 1980s, this trend only continued to gain momentum, but it was not until the 1990s that horror culture became mainstream in Japan.

³ Eng.: *kaidan* movies.

CHANGES IN THE LOST DECADES

In the decades following the war, Japan underwent rapid and sustained economic growth in what was dubbed the “Japanese economic miracle”. This momentum was suddenly plunged into stagnation by the collapse of the asset bubble in 1990 (Yoshino, Taghizadeh-Hesary, 2017). The period that followed, known as the “Lost Decades”, was marked by high unemployment and the social climate was unstable, as people were filled with anxieties about the future. It was in these circumstances that horror fully entered the mainstream.

Ghost stories depict a mysterious and unstable world, that’s why they resonate with unstable social climates and easily attract people. They evoke a certain sense, suggesting that this world is not the only one, that there might be another world out there. (Odakura, 2025)

Television programmes about supernatural and occult topics became very popular and were moved to the Saturday night prime time when viewership was at its peak. Many celebrities began appearing in such programmes (Horie, 2009: 7). Yuki Yoshida, one of the most prominent experts on *kaidan* in Japan, researched the development of modern *kaidan* from the late Shōwa era (1970s–1980s), when television networks began experimenting with horror content, to the Heisei era (1989–2019), during which horror culture became systematised in magazines, books and regular television specials. In the past decade, this expansion has extended further into live events, internet forums and podcasts (Yoshida, 2021).

Between the late 1990s and the early 2000s, a new wave of Japanese horror films emerged, increasingly circulating beyond cinemas and reaching domestic audiences through formats such as VHS. Films from this period came to be known as “J-Horror” and became a worldwide sensation, with some even receiving Western adaptations (see Wetmore, 2009). Despite their contemporary settings, J-Horror films continued to draw inspiration from *kaidan*. For example, the antagonist Sadako Yamamura in the 2003 film *Ring*, is directly based on the character of Oiwa and visually resembles traditional depictions of Japanese ghosts with white robes and long black hair (Davisson, 2015: 143). In a modern twist, she haunts her victims through a cursed VHS tape, representing fear of rapidly evolving technology and encapsulating a “culturally-fostered response to the fear of chaos in the techno-centric orderly system” (Ancuta, 2007: 1) at the turn of the century.

The revenge story has been a staple of Japanese horror for centuries, and Sadako, like Oiwa, embodied the archetype of wronged women getting revenge on their abusers. In response to changing social conditions, many horror films offered poignant commentary on matters such as marital obligations, family betrayal and selfishness (Iwasaka, Toelken, 1994: 72). Closely linked to fears surrounding women’s emancipation is the disintegration of the traditional family, and many 21st-century Japanese horror films are in fact set within broken families (Pruett, 2010: 11).

Horror media thus became a mirror through which cultural anxieties and societal issues could be explored. In this regard, the works of director Koji Shiraishi are particularly

noteworthy. His film *Noroi: The Curse* (2005) kick-started the horror mockumentary genre in Japan. His films blur the line between reality and fiction by incorporating elements of real folklore, paranormal investigation, and even casting real celebrities and idols as themselves. Narrative in his films unfolds through a collage of newspaper articles, variety show segments, and found footage, all of which is presented “as real”:

Only occasionally does the veil slip in the diegetic world, revealing the artifice – if not for these slips, it would take only a modicum of suspension of disbelief to read these films as non-fictional (especially if one is already predisposed toward a belief in the supernatural). (Ellis, 2021: 196)

NEW WAVE OF KAIDAN PUBLICATIONS AND “GHOST PHOTOGRAPHY” MAGAZINES

Alongside film, books and magazines constituted another major medium for ghost stories in the 1990s. Especially popular among younger readers was the novel series *Gakkō no Kaidan*,⁴ set in a school and later adapted into films and anime. The stories in the series were presented as fictional rumours, but were in fact originally collected by the folklorist and middle-school teacher Tōru Tsunemitsu (Horie, 2009: 7), and they even inspired serious academic discussion (Foster, 2009: 205). “Real-life ghost stories” based on personal experiences were also in high demand. In response, many horror magazines invited readers to submit their own stories.

Some magazines specialised in presenting selections of ghost photographs called *shinrei shashin* (心霊写真), accompanied by stories explaining the context and circumstances that led to the creation of the anomalous images. Spirit photography first appeared in Japan in the 1900s, mostly in connection with Western-style spiritualism or occultism, but it was not until the end of the century, when technology improved and cameras became widely accessible, that it became widely popular (Picone, 2017: 11). Anthropologist Richard Chalfen researched the phenomenon over a period of five years⁵ and found that it was mentioned by virtually every person he interviewed, although many were unwilling to discuss the topic, indicating that the subject was not treated lightly in Japan (Chalfen, 2008: 53). The stories that were conveyed to him often began with someone retrieving their developed pictures from the camera shop and noticing strange anomalies, which were then interpreted as messages from ghosts or their direct presence.

For the sake of personal wellbeing, it was highly recommended that such photographs be destroyed. They were usually taken to a shrine or temple for proper disposal, although some individuals opted instead to send them to magazines or television programmes (Chalfen, 2008: 64). When I raised the topic with a camera shop owner, he explained that ghost photography was common during the film era, but declined with the advent of

⁴ Eng.: School Ghost Stories.

⁵ From 1994 to 1999.



Figure 3: Horror section in bookstore (Photo by the author, 9.9.2025)

digital photography – either because film was considered especially suitable for capturing ghosts, or because digital photo editing tools undermined the perceived authenticity of such images. As a result, ghost photography is not as prevalent today as it once was. Horror literature, however, remains an important genre, and most bookstores have extensive sections dedicated to *kaidan*, horror and the occult. One of the biggest active publishers specialising almost exclusively in horror content, Takeshobo, releases five books per month and focuses on *kaidan* based on authors' own experiences or second-hand accounts (Odakura, 2025).

According to Professor of Death & Life Studies at Tokyo University, Norichika Horie, the largest consumers of such literature are middle-aged readers, while younger people tend to show more interest in experiencing paranormal phenomena firsthand (N. H., personal correspondence, 28.3.2025). To cater to these interests, some publications are designed as instruction manuals and guidebooks for visiting so-called *shinrei supotto* (心霊スポット) – haunted places and sites of paranormal activity – informing readers where they may have some supernatural experience (De Antoni, 2017: 145).

HAUNTED SITES AND LEGEND TRIPS

Research in Japanese folklore studies on urban legends regarding ghosts suggests that they emerged alongside urbanisation in the modern period, but are not limited only to cities. Such narratives are often set in locations such as tunnels, mountain ridges, bridges, abandoned hospitals and schools (Takaoka, 2006). As contact with nature has become increasingly limited for most urban Japanese, these “remote” and “dark” spaces within urban environments have become fertile settings for supernatural occurrences (Williams, 2015: 59–60). Kaidan that are tied to specific places – or types of places – reveal different attitudes towards the environments in which they are set, reflecting what “people think about the liminal aspects of the physical world” (Thomas et al., 2007: 49).

Interestingly, a quantitative analysis study of 114 sites in Toyama Prefecture conducted in 2020, which compared sources from 1910s newspapers with online ghost portals from 2018, found a noticeable shift of haunted sites away from urban areas, along with a reduction in the variety and interaction frequency (Koshiro, Yennan, 2020). This change can be attributed to the fact that urban areas in modern-day Toyama, like most cities in Japan, are highly built-up and leave limited space for locations that could potentially become haunted sites. As a result, locations on the outskirts of cities and in rural areas have become more viable candidates.

Claims about the authenticity of haunted sites are often supported by “historical sources”, such as excerpts from Edo-period kaidan literature or even the Konjaku



Figure 4: The famous haunted Kiyotaki tunnel in Kyoto (Photo by the author, 8.9.2025)

monogatari, cited as evidence to strengthen narratives surrounding a specific place or event (Picone, 2017: 2). In a sense, we can consider shinrei supotto as a modern iteration of the hyakumonogatari kaidankai – fuelled by legends, personal encounters, strange phenomena and, ultimately, commercialism:

Turn on the TV in Japan, especially around the summertime when the yūrei⁶ roam the country, and you are almost guaranteed to see a program about a late-night visit to a yūrei spot, also known as a shinrei spot. These are essentially haunted locations; scenes of murder, suicide or horrific accidents. These spots are where the ghost hunters go with their night vision goggles and electronic recording equipment, hoping to catch a physical glimpse of the other world. (Davisson, 2015: 118)

Unsurprisingly, haunted sites flourished in the mediascape of television content, publications, blogs and websites, and became targets of social practices such as “courage testing” and even tourism. Andrea De Antoni has researched the tourism of haunted sites through a case study of organised ghost tours in Kyoto. In these tours, participants travel by bus from one haunted site to another, while a storyteller tells stories connected to each location (De Antoni, 2017; 2023).

The main character on the bus was the guide, U-san, a male in his early sixties, from Kyoto Prefecture, always dressed in black. /.../ U-san not only entertained the people on the bus during the journey from one place to another with various stories about ghosts or supernatural phenomena, but he also provided information about history and the ghosts in the places that the tour would visit, thus playing a major role in constructing places as haunted. (De Antoni, 2017: 153)

KIMODAMESHI: COURAGE-TESTING LEGEND TRIPS

Organised visits to haunted sites stand in contrast to the phenomenon of courage testing called *kimodameshi*, literally meaning a “test of the liver”, as the liver is associated with courage in Japan. In folklore studies, this phenomenon is called a “legend trip” – a ritual visit to an allegedly haunted or marginal site that involves the ostension, or literal enactment, of local supernatural legends (Ellis, 1991: 279). These trips are often prompted by supernatural narratives that provide context for the destination and enable participants to encounter these narratives directly (Thomas et al., 2007: 51). Just like the hyakumonogatari kaidankai, kimodameshi was originally a past-time of adult warriors, and the motif of seeking encounters with supernatural beings already appears in early kaidan literature.

⁶ Yūrei (幽霊), literally faint spirit, is a Japanese term for a ghost.

In Japan kimodameshi usually involves a group of friends deciding to visit a haunted location at night. While the rest of the group may wait in the car, one or two people venture out to the chosen spot and either bring something back or leave some sort of mark that can be observed the next day. In some extreme cases, it even involves spending the night at the haunted site.

URBAN LEGENDS ON THE INTERNET

In recent years, the widespread availability of cameras and mobile phones has led many legend trips to be filmed and shared online. This further reaffirms the typology of haunted sites and leads audiences to replicate such visits, even recording their own experiences, thereby becoming producers and not just consumers of horror content. Before the advent of modern social media platforms, however, paranormal experiences and stories were mostly shared on online forums and imageboards:

From the 1990s to the early 2000s, the creepypasta/urban legends stories were really popular. They were posted mainly on 2chan.⁷ With the rise of the internet, I think there was an atmosphere of expectation that something hidden in the world might be uncovered. Then we could kind of enjoy floating somewhere between the fake and reality ... It was a period when there was a good balance between the fake and the real to maximise the spread of urban legends/creepypastas. (Jumpei, 2025)

Many iconic urban legends, such as Kisaragi station, originated in such forum threads where anonymous participants also provided commentary and analyses of the stories themselves. According to Megane Oji-chan, the key difference between urban legends and kaidan lies in the identifiability of the source:

In ghost stories, the source is identifiable. For example, “I heard this from so-and-so.” Some people define that as the essence of a kaidan. You can clearly trace the person who experienced the strange event. But with urban legends, the experiencer isn’t clear. Take Japan’s famous urban legend “Hanako-san of the Toilet”. It’s a ghost story, but nobody knows who first experienced it. It’s more on the level of “apparently, people have seen her here and there”. The credibility of the story isn’t important – as long as it’s interesting, it spreads as a rumour. That said, the categories aren’t strictly divided. Some urban legends start as ghost stories, and some ghost stories arise from supposed sightings of figures in urban legends. The relationship between ghost stories and urban legends is best thought of as a gradient. (Megane Oji-chan, 2025)

⁷ Japan’s most popular online forum in the 2000s.



Figure 5: Horror Instagram reels (Photo by the author, 27.9.2025)

Today, numerous YouTube channels are dedicated to horror video content and during the summer season, when kimodameshi traditionally takes place, it is not unusual to see television specials in which celebrities and idols venture out to haunted sites and

whereas once warriors showed their courage by remaining impassive, most contemporary ghost videos include exaggerated amateur – often female – dramatizations of the terror supposedly felt by paranormal explorers. (Picone, 2017: 9)

Like other media content, horror-themed recordings have also started to adapt to short-video (reel) formats on platforms such as TikTok and Instagram, presenting brief clips or even staged scenes of hauntings. In his book *The Scariest Kaidan as Liberal Arts: From the Kojiki to TikTok*, Yoshida argues that such formats can be understood as legitimate successors to the oral and printed traditions of kaidan (Yoshida, 2024).

THE “SLIT-MOUTHED WOMAN” AS AN EXAMPLE OF OSTENSIVE ACTION

One of the earliest examples of a contemporary urban legend in Japan appeared in December 1978, well before the rise of the internet, and spread through the country at an alarming rate. The legend was centred on the character of a Slit-Mouthed Woman – a new addition to the lineage of monstrous women within Japanese folklore, such as Oiwa. By the summer of 1979, a national newspaper identified it as one of the “buzzwords” (Foster, 2007: 699).

The Slit-Mouthed Woman serves as an example of ostensive action in Japanese urban legends. Dégh and Vázsonyi define ostension as a mode of legend communication in

which an action or event functions as the message itself – a “presentation” rather than a representation (Dégh, Vázsonyi, 1983: 6). This implies that “not only can facts be turned into narratives but narratives can also be turned into facts” (ibid.: 12). In practical terms, this process explains the acting out of fictional narratives, producing tangible social consequences through real-world enactment.

The circulation of stories about the Slit-Mouthed Woman’s existence led to the formation of organised groups for escorting children home from school and increased police patrols. At the height of the panic, one woman wanted to scare a restaurant manager. Putting on makeup and holding a knife, she went out but was spotted by a taxi driver who notified the police. She was taken into custody and the following day’s newspaper headlines read: “Has the frightening ‘Slit-Mouthed Woman’ finally been arrested!?” (*Shukan josei*, 1979: 30–31 in Foster, 2007: 718). Her legend has now become a modern kaidan classic, and its enduring popularity shows how “textual discourse can bleed into cultural practice, as the rumour plays itself out within a real-world context and then loops back into the discursive mass media forum” (Foster, 2007: 718).

HORROR THEMED ART EXHIBITIONS

Recently, some horror authors have begun experimenting with presenting kaidan narratives in the form of art installations and mixed media formats. A recent example is a pair of very popular exhibitions that toured multiple venues across Japan, created through a collaboration of Nashi, a famous kaidan writer, the haunted-house production company Yami, and Tokio Ōmori, a producer at TV Tokyo.

The first “Missing Exhibition” (行方不明) opened in Tokyo in 2024, and after going viral, travelled to both Nagoya and Osaka in 2025. After visiting the Missing Exhibition in Osaka, I had the opportunity to speak with Anakura – one of the organisers at the venue. The exhibition featured items, letters, videos and other forms of media with accompanying texts which provided context, creating a narrative through these objects, which were presented as material proof of their respective urban legends. Although visitors were reminded at the entrance that all stories were completely fictional, the exhibition carries an aura of eerie realism. Between different sections, texts by the authors directly implored the audience to reflect on how such stories construct their own reality.

According to Anakura, the exhibition was most visited by women aged between 20 and 29, followed by the group of women aged between 30 and 39. Most visitors came in groups or pairs, highlighting the importance of a shared experience. The follow-up “Fear Exhibition” (恐怖心) has since also opened in Tokyo, attracting between 100,000 and 120,000 visitors:

The exhibition brings together various fears that each human being has, and is organized into a spatial display. It is divided into four zones: “Fear of existence”, “Fear of society”, “Fear of space”, and “Fear of concepts”, and visitors are invited to relive these fears in order. (Hirozai, 2025)

Although these two exhibitions have attracted the most attention on social media, many more similar exhibitions and pop-up events are being organised across the country. In August 2025, one was held at Hiroshima PARCO's shopping centre event space, presenting kaidan drawn exclusively from Hiroshima Prefecture and inviting visitors to rediscover and explore local urban legends and folklore (Parco Art, 2025). EXPO 2025 in Osaka also organised a horror event with local storytellers, merchandise and even live music.

KAIDAN AS PERFORMANCE

Following the spread and growing popularity of new forms of horror media, kaidan storytelling experienced a revival. Live events and competitions began to be organised across the country.

It seems that the same drive to experience a personal interaction with the mysteries and realities of the “other side”, which motivated audiences in earlier times to flock to performances of the One Hundred Tales, still draws people to modern rephrasings of the same cluster of values. (Iwasaka, Toelken, 1994: 42)

This performative aspect of storytelling elevates orally narrated kaidan above their written counterparts and increases their capacity to engage – and ultimately to scare – audiences. If we follow Bauman's definition of performance as a mode of verbal communication in which speakers assume responsibility before an audience (Bauman, 1984: 11), kaidan can be understood not only as narrative representations of belief, but also as interpretative events that bring the stories to life. When kaidan are performed, meaning emerges not only from the narrative content, but also from the interaction between storyteller, audience and the social context of the performance. Furthermore, the venue and its atmosphere further enhance the effectiveness of the performance, as subsequent sections will show.

REVIVAL OF LIVE EVENTS

According to Yoriko Ogawa, deputy editor-in-chief of the horror publishing house Takeshobo, kaidan events have become more popular again since the COVID-19 pandemic, and one of the biggest platforms for sharing information about them is social media.

After the COVID pandemic, the number of people telling ghost stories exploded. You could say that the real driving force behind the steadily growing occult boom of the past five years has been the pandemic. (Megane Oji-chan, 2025)

Jumpei, whom I interviewed about the kaidan scene together with his partner, started a project titled “Japan Makes Me Scared” (Japan Makes me Scared, n.d.), including a podcast, a blog where they post stories and a Discord community. He recounted his experience growing up and seeing horror culture change:

When I was a kid, when kaidan stories could only be discovered through TV, radio programmes or books, they weren’t always broadcast throughout the year (summer was the popular period). Kaidan was a bit like a nerdy hobby, and it was simply a seasonal, one-off type of entertainment for the majority. But again, with SNS,⁸ more and more people have the chance to listen to horror storytelling. And at the same time, more and more people also start telling stories online. (Jumpei, 2025)

In a sense, kaidan migrated from conventional forms of media to more independent outlets as the internet enabled people to share stories as they saw fit:

In the 1990s, TV and magazines were full of occult specials, but nowadays the mainstream is what we call “internet kaidan”. Mainstream media started to worry more about sponsors and compliance, and had to be careful about how they handled things, but internet ghost stories have the advantage of not being tied to sponsors. From the 2000s onward, the people who wanted deeper, more hardcore occult content started to enjoy ghost stories online, and that has since become the mainstream. (Megane Oji-chan, 2025)

JUNJI INAGAWA: THE GRANDFATHER OF CONTEMPORARY KAIDAN

The famous storyteller Junji Inagawa is often cited as one of the most influential figures responsible for transforming kaidan storytelling culture into its contemporary form. According to Jumpei (2025), before the 2000s, kaidan was mostly associated with rumours and the circulation of urban legends, which were not taken seriously. Then Junji Inagawa and his contemporaries established a style in the sense of “something that was directly experienced by the storyteller or was personally recounted to him/her”. This style of storytelling has since continued to be the norm, demanding a high degree of originality and novelty in stories. For a kaidan storyteller from Kobe who goes under the stage name Napoli, Inagawa is a legend in the field:

You know the famous old guy telling scary stories. Inagawa Junji. He was telling scary stories all the time when we were children. And we listened to him, to his scary stories, on television. So we all grew up on that, and now we are telling scary stories ourselves. Junji’s children. (Napoli, 2025)

⁸ SNS stands for Social Networking Service and is a term widely used in Japan to refer to social media.

Inagawa's career began on television, but unlike other horror shows airing at the time, which made use of special effects and studio crews, he relied on his rhetoric and storytelling skills in order to deliver fear to audiences. His enduring popularity today is attested by the fact that he has maintained his own fan club since 2002, and that some of his events are either member-exclusive or quickly sold out. He regularly tours the country on a "mystery night tour", which even has its own dedicated merchandise shop with shirts, caps, neck coolers, fans, stickers, posters and more. Many kaidan fans today belong to the generation that grew up with Inagawa's stories and those of his contemporaries, and they seem to constitute one of the strongest segments of the current kaidan scene:

The age group tends to be people in their 40s and 50s, although there are some younger attendees too. I think this has to do with the generation that grew up in the 1980s and 90s. That was the era when occult specials on TV and in magazines were getting high ratings. Whether or not someone was exposed to the occult during those formative years may determine whether they still enjoy it as adults. (Megane Oji-chan, 2025)

PROFESSIONALS, AMATEURS AND A BUDDHIST "KAIDAN MONK"

Inagawa is not the only "celebrity storyteller", however. Idol culture is something very prevalent in Japan, and the kaidan scene is not immune to it either. Napoli told me that "there are some good-looking guys, storytellers, that have lots of female fans!" (Napoli, 2025). In conversation with one fan of a particular storyteller, she told me that she often attends his events, buys his merchandise and constantly posts about him on her Instagram stories. The popularity of young male storytellers can perhaps be attributed to the fact that "around 70–80% of the audience at ghost-story events are women" (Megane Oji-chan, 2025). While storytellers initially tended to come from the entertainment industry, recent years have seen a growing number of amateur storytellers from all walks of life:

Before the pandemic, the main storytellers were comedians, writers and actors, but since then, the number of amateur storytellers has increased. These days, it's said that there are about 500 people, big and small, who tell ghost stories, and most of them are amateurs with a separate full-time job. The point about "having another profession" is especially interesting. When ghost stories include information that only someone from a particular industry could know, it adds depth and draws in the audience. (Megane Oji-chan, 2025)

Given the historical connection between Buddhism and kaidan, it is not surprising that a Kyoto-based Buddhist priest, Miki Daiun, also decided to take up kaidan storytelling. Drawing on years of experience with parishioners who reported all sorts of hauntings and even possession, he amassed a large collection of tales, which he shares with the

purpose of spreading Buddhist teachings, although he also recognises the entertainment value of his kaidan. Nicknamed the “Kaidan Monk”, he has an active YouTube Channel, attends a variety of events, and has published collections of his kaidan (Daiun, 2011). While Daiun remains first and foremost a Buddhist priest, some storytellers pursue their passion full-time, becoming professional storytellers:

If we define “professional” as someone who makes their living by telling horror stories, then it has become easier thanks to SNS. It used to be very hard because gaining fame was the first step in the past, but nowadays, people just share their stories on SNS pretty easily, and getting paid for it has also become easier. Still, most of the kaidan storytellers are not doing kaidan storytelling as their only job. They can also be comedians – as most of them are – presumably because comedians are generally good at telling stories. (Jumpei, 2025)

STORYTELLING COMPETITIONS

As live kaidan performances have grown in popularity, different competitions have emerged. Winning one provides an opportunity to kickstart one’s career in the scene, in addition to substantial prize money – sometimes in the range of 1–3 million yen.⁹ The biggest competitions are usually held in Tokyo, and although prize pools are smaller in Osaka, the organisers there still help the winners with promotion and event creation, etc. (Napoli, 2025). Yutaka Yoma, who recently won a competition, issued the following statement for the official website promoting the 2025 edition of the Scariest Kaidan Battle (怪談最恐戦):

Last year, I retired from the publishing company where I had worked for many years to become a full-time ghost storyteller and author. I’m not a celebrity or an influencer, but just a middle-aged office worker. Thanks to participating in the Most Terrifying Ghost Story Competition, I was able to make a modest living by telling ghost stories. I didn’t win the first year. But thanks to the attention of many people, my performance offers doubled. The following year, I won. The title of “Third Generation Most Terrifying Ghost Story Winner” has given me so much work! (Takeshobo, n.d.a)

Competitions may even be organised exclusively for participants under 30 years of age, to discover and develop young talent (Kaidanshi Tournament Shinpusen, 2025).

The concept is to breathe a breath of fresh air into the world of kaidan, in other words, to “discover young talent”. If you look at the kaidan scene today,

⁹ As of September 2025 this converts to around 5,000–17,000 euros.



Figure 6: Live storytelling event billboard in Osaka (Photo by the author, 26.3.2025)

there are far too few young storytellers. But there must be some undiscovered newcomers who tell truly scary stories. Our goal is to find and nurture such young people. (Itoyanagi, n.d.a)

In addition to its annual competitions, Takeshobo also hosts monthly contests with applicants sending in recordings of their performances (Takeshobo, n.d.b). The application guidelines list some interesting criteria: ghost stories may be true or fictional, however, if they are based on material provided by a third party, permission must be obtained to avoid copyright issues. Furthermore, although there are various definitions of *kaidan*, stories involving only humans and incidents that do not contain any bizarre appearances or occurrences (i.e. supernatural elements) are not eligible. Competitions are usually separated by format, and calls for written submissions are sometimes based on specific themes. Criteria for evaluation differ between competitions, but juries generally assess originality, scariness and delivery, and sometimes audience votes are also taken into account.

In addition to the storytelling and writing contests, there is also *kaidoku* (怪読) – the recital or reading aloud of *kaidan*, where “*you just read the stories which were written by someone like Koizumi Yakumo. So you really have to show your individuality in kaidoku*” (Napoli, 2025). Organisers usually provide a selection of works that can be read, and performers use different voices, breathing and rhythms when narrating the story (Takeshobo, n.d.a).

THE PROCESS OF COLLECTING AND ADAPTING KAIDAN

Besides being a talented narrator and performer, every good ghost storyteller should also have a good repertoire of stories for every occasion. Although it is possible to fabricate stories, it is greatly valued if they are based on some true events or were personally shared with the storyteller:

In my case, I usually collect ghost stories in bars, izakayas, or concept cafés – basically nightlife places. Other people go around asking coworkers or friends, or they might ask taxi drivers, or even someone sitting next to them on a park bench. As for storage, I just use the notes app on my smartphone. I hardly organise them at all – but that depends on the person. Some people transcribe everything carefully, and others keep handwritten notes. (Megane Oji-chan, 2025)

Napoli keeps her stories organised on her laptop and collects them not just from her Japanese friends, but also from people she meets abroad. During our interview, she even asked me if I had a ghost story to share, and after I narrated it to her, she asked for permission to tell it at one of the events she is planning to attend in the future. *“Every story is based on the truth, but yes, I make a little adjustment. In competitions, you cannot steal the stories from someone else or borrow articles from SNS”* (Napoli, 2025).

Likewise, storyteller Toshiaki Itoyanagi said he prefers to collect kaidan in person as opposed to online:

I collect ghost stories the old-fashioned way, by going around. I feel that many of them are more interesting than the ghost stories collected through social networking sites. Also, I often talk to older people; they are interesting to talk to. (Itoyanagi, n.d.c)

Once collected or written down, kaidan are often transformed and tailored to the delivery of each individual storyteller. In folklore studies, we differentiate between verifiable first-person accounts (memorates) and more distant stories (fabulate). Kaidan, as legends, oscillate between both ends of the spectrum. Often, a story can be transformed from its less credible abstract form into something that gives the audience a feeling of a more immediate encounter. Rather than presenting a fixed narrative, the repeated performance of a kaidan actively renews its relevance and places a story either into the recent past or the present. On the other hand, kaidan as legends can “sometimes regain their credibility and appeal by reverting to their memorate-form, only to later return to their third-person version” (Dégh, Vázsonyi, 1983: 21).

EVENT ORGANISATION

In 2007, Itoyanagi founded the company Kwaidansha (怪談社), which specialises in organising live kaidan events. Although horror writers were already active and ghost stories were being shared on the internet at the time, very few people were telling ghost stories at live performances. The idea proved successful and they never had trouble attracting an audience, with shows often selling out and typically accommodating around 100 people (Itoyanagi, n.d.b). Unlike elsewhere in the entertainment industry, customer satisfaction at kaidan events is assessed somewhat differently: “If an audience member says, ‘I’ll come again,’ it’s a failure. I only consider it a success when they say, ‘It was scary. I’m never coming again’” (Itoyanagi, n.d.c).

Live events and competitions are currently one of the most popular ways to experience kaidan, and many fans will attend an event featuring their favourite storyteller even if they have already heard the same stories online. Perhaps reflecting the rise of short-video formats and the increasingly fast pace of modern society, online kaidan stories have grown shorter (Ross, 2020). Submission guidelines for video contests often impose strict time limits, leaving little room for longer, more elaborate tales – which are usually reserved for live performances:

What really sets them apart from the kaidankai online or on TV is that they really go into much more detail. Especially on TV, there is a time limit – you have to finish the story in five minutes – so they have to drop some details from the stories, or some intense topic is avoided for reasons of security or privacy. But in live shows, probably because they are not recorded, they cover these details and share them with the audience, which makes the stories more real and scary! (Jumpei, 2025)

Kaidan events are often held at so-called “live houses”,¹⁰ often due to ease of organisation and greater accessibility, but some venues are fully dedicated to kaidan, such as the Wall of Despair bar (絶望の壁) in Osaka, where Megane works as a bartender and tells stories between pouring drinks. The bar also attracts customers for its extensive collection of cursed dolls and objects:

The owner of our place wanted to meet a ghost – that’s why the bar was founded. They thought about how they might encounter one and decided to collect lots of cursed objects. But just collecting them costs a lot of money, so the idea came up: why not open a bar and display the collection there? That way, the expenses could be recovered. Our bar’s concept is: “an izakaya where you can listen to ghost stories while surrounded by real cursed objects.” (Megane Oji-chan, 2025)

¹⁰ Live house (ライブハウス) is a Japanese term for a type of venue that hosts live music performances and can also be rented for different events.



Figure 7: Wall of Despair Bar, Osaka (Photo by the author, 26.4.2025)

Advertisement is usually conducted by word of mouth, as the kaidan scene is a close-knit community and many storytellers know each other. Information on upcoming events is shared through SNS and can also be viewed on dedicated websites such as Kwaidan GTR, which also lists past competitions, interviews with storytellers and other news regarding upcoming publications, etc. (Kwaidan GTR). There are so many different events, promotions and competitions scheduled that one can pick and choose where to go and who to listen to. In summary, the contemporary kaidan scene in Japan is steadily growing and shows no signs of slowing down.

CONCLUSION

From the earliest written sources and oral folklore to the present day, kaidan has gone through successive waves of renewed popularity, each bringing new forms and changes to the genre. The first major boom took place in the Edo period, when hyakumonogatari kaidankai gatherings set a precedent for today's storytelling events. Beyond oral storytelling – closely connected to the theatrical art forms of rakugo, noh and kabuki – this was also the first time ghost stories entered the literary world, producing classics such as Ueda Akinari's *Tales of Moonlight and Rain*.

The Meiji period introduced debates over the supernatural, with intellectuals arguing and interpreting beliefs in spirits and their reality. Still, *kaidan* continued to thrive among the populace and its cultural importance was reinforced at the beginning of the 20th century with the emergence of folklore studies in Japan. Soon after, film technology allowed new degrees of expression for artists to frighten their audiences, but it was not until after the Second World War that Japanese horror entered its golden era.

Some of the most significant changes and advances in horror culture came in the 1990s when the Japanese economic bubble collapsed, and the population was thrown into a period riddled with financial insecurity and anxieties about the future. Shows about paranormal investigation and urban legends became part of mainstream television, and J-horror films became a worldwide sensation. Furthermore, *kaidan* was widely disseminated through books and magazines, the latter even including sections on spirit photography and haunted sites.

Readers were encouraged to visit the locations presented in these stories, which were subject to a degree of typologisation – the backdrops to ghost stories became liminal urban areas such as tunnels, bridges and abandoned buildings. Groups of mainly young people began visiting these sites as part of courage-testing practices, while older generations participated in organised ghost tours. Eventually, with the rise of the internet in the 2000s, stories, rumours and urban legends were further shared through forums, blogs and social media.

Today, *kaidan* is once again thriving, its popularity surging after the COVID-19 pandemic, with live events, competitions, podcasts and themed bars attracting dedicated fans and even generating idol-like followings around some famous storytellers. Far from being a fading relic, *kaidan* has re-entered the mainstream, showing remarkable adaptability across oral, print, cinematic and digital platforms.

Through examples, this paper shows that *kaidan* can be considered as a form of legend that is collected, adapted and retold by storytellers. Yet *kaidan* as a phenomenon is not just a scary story – performance constitutes an essential aspect, as does the relationship between the storyteller and the audience. Its contemporary reception is also evident in the way *kaidan* narratives evolve into urban legends with media presence, generate examples of ostension and inspire a rise in legend tripping to haunted sites.

The enduring popularity of horror storytelling in Japan cannot be attributed solely to cultural continuity but also reveals a shared existential appetite for scary stories across generations. Encounters with organisers, storytellers and fans during fieldwork confirmed that *kaidan* is not merely a form of entertainment or a hobby. For many, it is a lived practice of negotiating the relationship with the unknown. Its appeal lies precisely in this ability to adapt, to mirror social anxieties, and to offer a way of confronting the instability of existence through the telling and retelling of supernatural tales.

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STATEMENT ON RESEARCH DATA MANAGEMENT

The author states that the article is based on ethnographic research materials that are not classified as research data. All additional information concerning the ethnographic research materials are available on reasonable request from the author.

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SODOBNI KAIDAN: JAPONSKO PRIPOVEDNIŠTVO GROZLJIVK KOT POPULARNA KULTURA

Japonska ima dolgo in bogato tradicijo pripovedovanja zgodb s strašljivo in nadnaravno vsebino, imenovanih *kaidan*. Zametki te folklorne in literarne zvrsti segajo v obdobje Heian (794–1185), ko so se pojavljale v zbirkah budističnih poučnih zgodb, imenovanih *setsuwa*. Te zgodbe so bile sprva znane predvsem budističnim menihom in elitam, v obdobju Edo (1603–1868) pa so se začele širiti med širše prebivalstvo. V tem času je po stoletjih nasilnih konfliktov nastopilo obdobje miru in gospodarskega razcveta. Potujoči trgovci, romarji in duhovniki so začeli pripovedovati in prenašati zgodbe med različnimi regijami, gradivo pa so črpali iz resničnih dogodkov ali krajevnih govoric. Kmalu so se pojavili tudi poklicni pripovedovalci, kaidan pa se je razvijal skupaj z gledališkimi umetnostmi, kot so rakugo, noh in kabuki. Poleg gledaliških predstav so ljudje začeli organizirati tudi srečanja, imenovana *kaidankai*, na katerih so si med seboj pripovedovali strašljive zgodbe.

Vsak si je želel nabora dobrih, predvsem pa čim bolj strašljivih zgodb, s katerimi bi se lahko izkazal v družbi, zato so se zgodbe začele zapisovati in zbirati v knjižicah, imenovanih *kaidanshū*. Pisatelji so začeli ustvarjati dela, ki so prirejala elemente popularnih zgodb in jih obogatila z umetniško izraznostjo – kot na primer delo *Pripovedi deževnega meseca* Uede Akinarija, ki še danes velja za klasiko japonske književnosti.

V obdobju Meiji (1868–1912) so bili kaidan deležni kritik intelektualcev in razsvetljencev, ki so si prizadevali za izkoreninjenje japonskih »vraževerij«. Njihovi poskusi so bili neuspešni, saj je javnost še naprej uživala v poslušanju in

branju strašljivih zgodb. Hkrati je zbiranje pripovedi postalo eden izmed temeljev razvoja japonske folkloristike v začetku 20. stoletja, ki se je začela z objavo zbirke pripovedi *Tōno monogatari* Kunia Yanagite. V tem obdobju je bilo ustanovljeno tudi društvo Kaidankai, katerega namen je bil vzpostaviti akademski diskurz o kaidanu.

Filmska industrija je kmalu po uvedbi te tehnologije na Japonskem začela snemati priredbe znanih kaidanov. Produkcija grozljivk se je med drugo svetovno vojno prekinila, po vojni pa je bila zaradi cenzure ameriških okupacijskih oblasti še vedno omejena. Po odpravi omejitev so v petdesetih in šestdesetih letih nastopila zlata leta japonskega grozljivega filma, kar je sovpadalo z obdobjem gospodarskega razcveta.

Okoli leta 1990 je zlom nepremičninskega trga državo pahnil v obdobje, imenovano »izgubljena desetletja«. Veliko ljudi je postalo brezposelnih, v družbi pa se je razširil pesimizem glede prihodnosti. V teh okoliščinah so strašljive zgodbe ponovno našle plodna tla in televizijski programi o nadnaravnih temah so postali izjemno gledani. Na prelomu tisočletja se je pojavil tudi nov val grozljivk pod imenom »J-Horror«, ki je bil postavljen v sodobnost. Zaznamuje ga preplet folklornih elementov z modernimi tesnobami, kot so urbana okolja in strah pred tehnologijo.

Izhajati so začele tudi publikacije, knjige in revije, ki so trdile, da vsebujejo resnične grozljive zgodbe. Nekatere so bile celo namenjene zbiranju fotografij duhov in so bralce pozivale, naj pošiljajo svoje fotografije in zgodbe; druge so opisovale kraje, kjer naj bi domnevno strašilo, zato so se številni bralci odločili te kraje obiskati in preveriti resničnost teh trditev. Govorice in povedke so se začele širiti tudi po spletu, zlasti na različnih forumih. Tovrstne vsebine so danes vseprisotne na platformah, kot sta YouTube in TikTok.

Poleg teh novih oblik grozljivih vsebin se je v zadnjih desetletjih ponovno populariziralo tudi samo pripovedovanje zgodb. Največje spremembe so moji sogovorniki zaznali po pandemiji koronavirusa, saj se od takrat organizira vedno več dogodkov, poleg tega pa se je povečalo tudi število aktivnih pripovedovalcev. Večina pripovedovalcev ima druge službe in pripovedovanje izvaja v prostem času, nekateri pa delujejo profesionalno. V zadnjih letih je to vedno lažje zaradi organizacije tekmovanj, ki zmagovalcem ponujajo visoke denarne nagrade in predvsem promocijo. Tako si je mnogo pripovedovalcev uspelo zgraditi kariero v zabavni industriji. Poleg tekmovanj so se v mestih začeli pojavljati tudi tematski bari s strašljivo dekoracijo, kjer lahko obiskovalci ob pijači poslušajo zgodbe.

Fenomen kaidana lahko v okviru folkloristike razumemo kot obliko legend, ki jih pripovedovalci zbirajo, prirejajo in vsakič nekoliko drugače pripovedujejo. Kaidan ni zgolj zgodba, temveč tudi performans, pri katerem je pomemben odnos med pripovedovalcem in občinstvom. Nekatere zgodbe so prerasle v urbane legende z močno medijsko prisotnostjo, pa tudi v primere ostenzije in obiskovanja krajev, kjer naj bi strašilo – t. i. *legend tripping*.

Spoznanja iz terenskega dela in spletnih virov kažejo, da se kaidan na Japonskem danes nenehno razvija in širi. Poleg prisotnosti v različnih medijih je

ponovno v ospredju tudi sama tradicija pripovedovanja. Lahko rečemo, da kaidan ni zgolj oblika zabave in kratkočasenja, temveč tudi zrcalo družbe, hkrati pa tako pripovedovalcem kot poslušalcem ponuja orodje za osmišljanje lastnih prepričanj o nadnaravnem.

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Recenzije in
poročila o knjigah

Recensioni
di libri

Book
reviews

Крашенинникова Ю. А., Низовцева С. Г., *КАЛЕНДАРНАЯ КУЛЬТУРА РУССКОГО НАСЕЛЕНИЯ ЗАВОДСКИХ ПОСЕЛЕНИЙ РЕСПУБЛИКИ КОМИ.* / Отв. ред. Т. А. Золотова. ЕКАТЕРИНБУРГ: УРО РАН, 2025, 440 с. + 16 с. илл. [Krasheninnikova Yu. A. and Nizovtseva S. G., *CALENDAR CULTURE OF THE RUSSIAN POPULATION OF MINING AND METALLURGICAL SETTLEMENTS OF THE KOMI REPUBLIC.* EDITED BY T. A. ZOLOTOVA. YEKATERINBURG: URAL BRANCH OF THE RUSSIAN ACADEMY OF SCIENCES, 2025, 440 p. + 16 p. OF ILLUSTRATIONS.]

The reviewed book is a worthy conclusion and synthesis of the long-term study of the topic by two scholars from the Institute of Language, Literature and History of the Komi Scientific Centre of the Ural Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences – Yu. A. Krasheninnikova and S. G. Nizovtseva (see Bibliography, Krasheninnikova, 2006, 2010, 2011, 2014, 2017a, 2017b, 2018, 2019, 2021, 2023, 2024, 2025; Nizovtseva, 2018, 2019, 2023a, 2023b, 2024; joint 2017, 2018, 2019a, 2019b, 2021). The book covers one of the lacunae on the map of Russian calendar rituals: it provides a detailed description of the ritual calendar culture of three factory settlements in the Komi Republic (Nyuvchim, Kazhim and Nyuchpas), where ironworks and iron-smelting industries emerged in the mid-18th century. Two of these metallurgical plants, which in modern terminology may be described as “city-forming”, existed until the late 1920s, and the third plant actually existed until the end of the twentieth century. In other words, the factory tradition itself spans almost a century, with its subsequent development lasting even longer.

The study is based on a wide-ranging body of sources, including field material recordings since 2008, ten expeditions using the “continuous survey” methodology, and repeated follow-up recordings for clarification. In addition, the authors have identified and included earlier recorded material from eight different archives, as well as various types of printed materials. The research methodology and techniques are clearly outlined in the Introduction.

Despite the widespread scholarly interest in calendar rituals within folklore studies, the book has a unique feature that sets it apart from similar works on other regional materials: it explores the factory tradition in addition to its general interest in peasant culture.

The culture of the factory population is examined in the context of current theoretical approaches. While Soviet folklore studies focused primarily on the working-class folklore created by workers themselves – reflecting their worldview and everyday life (working songs, legends, and oral narratives) – in recent decades, the scope of research has expanded to include the entire cultural repertoire of the workers, including elements of peasant folklore. This shift is reflected, for example, in the works of researchers from Perm, particularly A. V. Chernykh. The book identifies changes in traditional rituals in the workplace (pp. 260, 261), such as the significance of prognostic rituals for factory workers that only relate to personal life events, as well as the absence of references to production-related concerns in factory calendar rituals (ibid.). The authors assert that the development of cattle-breeding rituals in factory-based migrant cultures, alongside the near absence of agricultural rituals (such as divination concerning harvests and economic life), represents a specific feature of these traditions. However, we believe that the reason

for this is not the factory-based character of the communities, but rather the fact that they have become part of the general North Russian tradition. The factory context has only served to reinforce this.

The authors adopt a historical and typological approach to the calendar culture of the factory region. The tradition under study is considered secondary, having developed on the basis of “mother” cultures brought by the immigrants and different local types, characterised by an “insular” mode of existence. The analysis is based on a synchronic perspective – from the first third of the 20th century – within which its framework and dynamics are nevertheless revealed. The methodology and research methods are clearly defined in the Introduction.

The book is significant not only within the framework of “working” and “factory” themes in folklore and ethnography studies, but also addresses an important issue in the contemporary humanities: the regional and local aspects of culture. Drawing on the theoretical insights of N. I. Tolstoy in this field, and the research conducted by A. N. Vlasov on North Russian culture, the authors contribute to the solution of this problem and shed light on one of its facets by examining specific material. Their research is also relevant to the issue of the formation of migrant cultures, which are prevalent in Russia.

The authors provide a detailed description of the rituals across the entire annual cycle, examining them as interconnected sets of practices associated with seasonal turning points and major church festivals (Christmas, Easter and Pentecost), as well as the rituals associated with individual holy days. The book examines the rituals in all their genre diversity and the variety of their constituent elements, including the naming of holidays and ritual characters, the composition of participants, and the attitudes of the wider community towards them. Attention is also given to the actional and object-related aspects of the rituals, as well as the accompanying verbal texts – sentences, proverbs, signs, prohibitions, instructions, blessings and other poetic texts – both conventional and occasional. The book provides numerous supporting examples in the form of interview quotations. Whenever possible, the monography also shows the dynamics of the rituals. Chapter V constitutes a particularly valuable contribution on the preservation and transformation of factory workers’ festive culture in modern conditions.

The study is accompanied by three appendices and five indexes of various kinds. While some of them (such as the List of Abbreviations and Symbols and the List of Photographs and Illustrations) are traditionally auxiliary, i.e. facilitating navigation through the text, others are no less significant than the text of the study itself. For example, the Dictionary of Chrononyms, which spans 40 pages and contains approximately 70 entries, has independent scientific value. It provides not only an interpretation of the chrononym, presented in all variants available in the sources together with examples of usage in folk speech, but also a range of additional information about the designated holiday, including ritual practices, prohibitions and regulations. The annotated index of informants (pp. 378–389) proves to be a solid base of field material comprising 127 informants, some of whom were interviewed repeatedly over several times (Nos. 112, 117, etc.). At the same time, it can serve as an additional source when studying specific aspects of the topic. The annotations provide both local and chronological contextualisation, including information

about the informant's connection to a specific local tradition (place of birth and residence, as well as details concerning parents and more distant ancestors, sometimes extending to great-great-grandparents). The inclusion of interviews conducted at different points in time also allow us to see the dynamics of the tradition.

At first glance, the inclusion of extensive interview texts in the Appendix may appear superfluous. However, this is likely justified, since here, unlike in the quotations, the texts are given in full, offering complete narrative accounts of past festive practices. In a context where such rituals have ceased to exist in everyday life, these retrospective narratives are how they continue to exist in the present – as a form of folk culture, and in this form they deserve to be studied. In the book, the authors study this form, noting recurring motifs, their frequency, and modes of verbal expression, thereby developing a methodology for their characterisation.

The Bibliography, spanning 19 pages and including about 230 research papers, deserves special attention. It indicates that the study was conducted with consideration of all the work done by previous researchers (a review and serious analysis of their work is provided in the Introduction, pp. 17–20).

Thus, the book written by scholars from the Institute of Language, Literature and History of the Komi Scientific Centre of the Russian Academy of Sciences meets all the requirements of an academic publication and can serve as a model for studying the calendar rituals of other regions.

Like any serious research, it prompts further reflection and raises a number of questions, doubts and suggestions. It seems to us that the sheer number of sources sometimes overwhelms the authors, and some of the sources cited in the book are not included in the research. For example, the book devotes considerable attention to identifying the places from which the settlers came to the factory district. The article presents the results of historical research based on a variety of sources, alongside the authors' own research, including lists of settlers' surnames obtained from census records and parish registers. This material is invaluable for studying patterns in the transmission of cultural traditions. Not every local tradition has such data. However, we believe that the book does not use this material effectively. No conclusions are drawn from the lists of names, nor are their implications fully explored. We understand that studying these names is a significant undertaking, but if it has not been done, why include the lists and take up pages (pp. 11–17)? The book identifies the factors that influenced the formation and development of the migrant culture and the features that define it (pp. 22–23), but in our opinion, these factors are not sufficiently supported by concrete evidence. The processes of integration – and to a lesser extent filtration – within the migrant population of a single ethnic group and the entire new local society were more evident in the material culture and linguistic phenomena (nicknames) than in the rituals themselves.

The material on factory culture presented in the book is contextualised through broad comparative analysis, with relevant examples drawn from different regions of the country, ranging from Smolensk province to Siberia. However, it would have been preferable to see a comparison with the traditions of the places from which they were brought to the new territory. Although the authors repeatedly state that the nature of the sources allows only

a synchronous snapshot of the tradition since the 1930s, rather than a deeper diachronic analysis, and that they do not aim to examine the initial formation of the tradition, we believe that the sources they have collected provide a partial basis for addressing this task. By comparing the sources with specific “parent” traditions, we can gain a better understanding of the selection and modification of the material, which can help us identify the patterns of secondary culture formation. For example, it is repeatedly mentioned that the settlers included residents of the Vetluga district of the Kostroma province.

A comparison with the Vetluga ritual practices suggests that the factory tradition did not include elements such as Lenten rounds of courtyards, the collection of “crosses” (biscuits) with the corresponding incantations (significant in the Vetluga tradition), and “*ileiny*” (under-dish songs). This absence may be explained by the specificity of these practices, which were not reinforced either by the regional traditions of other immigrants or by the surrounding cultural environment, suggesting that there may be other principles of selection and inheritance in addition to the ones mentioned.

Similarly, comparisons between this “insular” culture and its immediate surroundings would have been desirable. Comparisons with North Russian culture as a whole are consistently made, as well as with individual, well-studied regions (such as the Luzsky region), but we would like to see more focused and precise comparisons. This should clarify some of the conclusions, such as the idea that the rituals of the culture’s carriers were influenced by the absence of an agrarian complex, rather than by the form of their work, as discussed earlier. However, these should be understood purely as our suggestions to the authors. The book represents a serious study and one that opens the way for further studies of a similar kind.

The book is dedicated to the memory of the authors’ teacher, Andrey Nikolaevich Vlasov. This is a fitting tribute to the work he taught and the scholarly devotion he inspired in them.

Klara Evgenievna Korepova, Nizhny Novgorod

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