

The role of the experiences with the dead in the lives of individuals in rural Slovakia: Practices and rituals

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore people's experiences with the dead and subsequent rituals, practices and associated ideas. Experiences and subsequent practices can be analyzed and classified according to whether they are individual or collective, according to their degree of generality, intentionality and rigidity; and in terms of whether they are first-hand experiences or general narratives. The data presented in the paper were gathered during long-term ethnographic research carried out in the Horehronie region in central Slovakia in 2023 and 2024. The research site is characterized by a high prevalence of members of the Roman Catholic Church who are of Slovak nationality. The ethnographic research carried out so far shows that rituals, practices, associated ideas, and people's experiences with the dead and their agency are multidimensional phenomena influenced mainly by the Catholic religion, and to a lesser extent by folk religion or vernacular religion. The agency of the dead is usually manifested because of experiences with the dead that cause the performance of rituals, ritualized types of behavior, ritualized practices or other activities, and because of contemplation about the moral and religious aspects of the lives of individuals and society.

KEYWORDS: death, experiences with the dead, agency of the dead, ritual, practice, ethnography, Slovakia

Introduction

Death, and the ideas, practices, and rituals associated with death, are well-established areas of study in the social sciences and humanities, particularly in sociocultural anthropology and ethnology. Scholars such as Ariés (2020), who explored the cultural, reli-

gious and historical transformations of the perception of death and dying, Bloch (1971), Bloch and Parry (1982), Engelke (2019), Hertz (1960), Huntington and Metcalf (1979, 1991), Silverman, Baroiller, and Hemer (2021), who have researched diverse aspects of death and dying through the lens of sociocultural anthropology, and Krekovič (1993) or Taylor (2005), who explore death and dying from an archaeological perspective, among others, have contributed significantly to this field. The anthropology of death explores how different societies and individuals around the world perceive and respond to death, conceptualize the afterlife, and conduct postmortem practices and rituals (Abramovitch, 2015, p. 870; Soukup M., 2016; Soukup V., 2016). In this regard, an important question is also how experiences with the dead and death stimulate the performance of rituals and ritualized practices. Rituals form a central topic in the study of ethnology, sociocultural anthropology, religious studies, sociology, and psychology (Bell, 1997; Xygalatas, 2022; Whitehouse, 1995, 2004, 2021).

The topic of death, funerals, rituals and customs has been extensively studied in both Czech and Slovak ethnological contexts. Beginning in the early twentieth century, there was a significant increase in the publication of regional and local monographs that detail these topics. The second half of the twentieth century saw an increase in publications addressing burials, customs, rituals, and practices associated with the dead and death. These works provide valuable ethnographic material, insightful analyses, and stimulating theoretical and methodological reflections (see Beňušková, 2017; Botík, 1999; Botík, et al., 2001; Jakubíková, 1972, 1980, 1997, 1999, 2001; Jakubovská, 2016; Jágerová, 2008; Navrátilová, 2004). In the Horehronie region, ethnographic research concerning the various aspects of death and funeral rituals has been conducted by Slovak ethnologist M. Jágerová (2008). In her synthetic work, Jágerová addressed contemporary forms of customary behavior associated with the death and burial of individuals in the selected localities, taking both geographical and social (confession, gender, and age) aspects into account (Jágerová, 2008, p. 9–10). Her ethnographic analysis is related to the second half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first. Jágerová presents ethnographic material from villages in the region, but she did not conduct ethnographic research in the locality that was the research subject of this paper. Nevertheless, Jágerová's work is an excellent ethnographic source for comparison and inspiration for researching funerary customs in contemporary times.

One of the basic features of human psychology is the search for the source of the agency of events, actions, and processes in our social and ecological environment. As Claire White puts it, humans are inclined to perceive and find agency in the social and ecologi-

cal environment in numerous ways (White, 2021, p. 65; Barrett, 2004; Guthrie, 1993). Concerning the dead, this tendency manifests itself in various ways when the dead are ascribed the capacity to influence the lives of the living. In practice, this means that various types of behaviors and ideas of living people are influenced by the notion of the agency of the dead. Agency can be understood as the socially and culturally mediated and ascribed capacity to act and influence the physical and non-physical realms. It is closely related to intentionality and is frequently studied in the context of cultural practices, rituals, and beliefs, which is precisely the focus of this paper. The existence of this type of agency of the dead is contingent on several factors relating to the existence of certain assumptions regarding the afterlife. According to White, these assumptions include the notion that the person survives biological death, embarks on a journey to the next life, resides in a physical location, and retains mental processes and identity (White, 2021, p. 143). Related to the last notion is the assumption that the deceased person is interested in the actions, opinions, attitudes, morals, etc., of living human beings, and thus has both a reason to, and the intention of, directly or indirectly influencing their lives. Furthermore, as Silverman, Baroiller and Hemer argue, diverse ontologies concerning the dead create a variety of relational possibilities and determine whether the dead have agency at all, how it is experienced, and how their presence is manifested and interpreted. Such diverse ontologies also shape the responsibilities of the family, kin, friends, acquaintances and community toward the ancestors and the dead in general, and finally, influence the character of ongoing relationships with them—e.g. whether they are established, encouraged, or possibly discouraged (Silverman, Baroiller & Hemer 2021, p. 6).

Building upon the points made above, this paper aims to explore the role and dimensions of the agency of the dead in the lives of individuals in contemporary rural Slovakia, focusing mainly on experiences of the people with the dead and subsequent associated practices and rituals. This study is framed by the following empirical research question: What rituals and practices are invoked by experiences with the dead? The paper will focus on individual experiences and contexts, considering the factors influencing individuals' practices associated with the dead. In this regard, attention will also be paid to relevant collective activities. In the case of collective activities, the focus will lie on whether and how individual persons experience the agency of the dead during collective activities such as commemorations, visits to cemeteries, and memorials or collective rituals. This paper aims to analyze and classify people's experiences with the dead, and subsequent rituals, practices and associated ideas. The data presented in the paper were gathered during long-term ethnographic research in a village in the Horehronie region in central Slovakia in 2023 and 2024. The research site is characterized by a high

prevalence of members of the Roman Catholic Church of Slovak nationality, its agrarian nature, local manufacturing companies, and the intensive activity of folk music and dance groups¹.

Theoretical framework

All important moments in the lives of individuals and society are permeated by rituals. I suppose we could add that almost all important moments in the lives of individuals are, to some extent, important moments in the life of society, and *vice versa*. These important moments in the lives of individuals and society are accompanied by rituals, ceremonies and commemorations, which have been popular topics of research in sociocultural anthropology since the pioneering work of Émile Durkheim (1995), Arnold van Gennep (2018), Robert Hertz (1960), and many others. One such crucial moment is death, which has been accompanied by ritual since time immemorial (Xygalatas, 2022, p. 251; also, Ariés, 2020; Taylor, 2005). However, in addition to rites of passage such as burials and secondary burials (Forth, 2018, p. 3–4; Palgi, Abramovitch 1984, p. 387), many rituals and practices that do not bear the characteristics of rites of passage are associated with death, the deceased, the soul, and the afterlife. In this section, I will outline the definitions of ritual I utilize in data analysis and interpretation.

Roy Rappaport defines ritual as the performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances that the performers do not fully encode. According to Rappaport, but also Lang and Kundt, rituals offer a conventional (invariant and encoded/legitimized by previous generations) and performative (visible, tangible, or physical) way of communicating (Rappaport, 1994, p. 24; Lang, Kundt, 2023, p. 3), and thus represent an important communicative platform. Furthermore, according to Dimitris Xygalatas, a leading expert in the field of ritual research, rituals are highly structured and require rigidity; they must always be performed in the culturally and socially determined “correct” way, are repetitive (i.e. the same actions are performed on the same occasions), and are characterized by redundancy (Xygalatas, 2022, p. 81; Uhrin, 2024).

Although rituals and ritualized behaviors and practices are characterized by a large degree of stereotyped and rigid types of behavior, they often involve actions that may not be characterized by these properties and allow for a certain degree of individual variability. In some sociocultural and religious contexts, often in alternative spirituality groups, the emphasis may even be placed on personal aspects and creativity (see

¹ The data from the last census in 2021 are publicly available at <https://www.scitanie.sk/en>

Bužeková, 2024; Bergen, 2019; Heelas, 1996). In addition to collective rituals, people also perform individual or solitary rituals, which are an equally important part of every society, culture, or religious system. Individual rituals are particularly significant in the anthropology of death and research into ideas and practices associated with death and the dead (see Bužeková, 2024), as people can carry out a number of these rituals and ritualized practices individually.

As Whitehouse explains, the term ritual is often used to describe a variety of behavioral expressions. On the one hand, these include highly formalized and complex collective rituals, ceremonies, and rites. These can include, for example, funerals, or commemorations of dead persons such as fallen soldiers, famous writers or politicians, or the “triduum” of All Saints’ Eve, All Saints’ Day, and All Souls’ Day, traditionally called “Dušičky” (which can be translated as “little souls”), which are an important holiday in Slovakia due to the prevalence of the Catholic Church (Bužeková, 2024, p.13; Zajonc, 2014, p. 214–225). On the other hand, the term ritual also encompasses individual behaviors such as blessing oneself, lighting a candle and saying a prayer to the dead alone at home, or following culturally established rules of etiquette (Whitehouse, 2021, p. 1). The second group can include individual rituals and practices associated with communicating with the dead, such as praying for the souls of the dead, cleaning graves, caring for the belongings of the deceased's loved ones, and many others. This distinction put forth by Whitehouse can also be applied to the study of rituals and practices related to death in the ethnographic and Christian religious context of rural Slovakia.

Following Whitehouse, it is also useful to bear in mind Aruksak's division of all death-related aspects and behaviors of human life. According to Aruksak, they can generally be divided into rituals, ritualized behaviors, ceremonies and ideas that begin to operate upon the occurrence of death (or a death-related practice) in the neighborhood, family, religious group, etc., and more general death-related ideas and behaviors in daily life (Aruksak, 1998, p. 7). Another intriguing way of classifying experiences with the dead is to categorize them according to whether the interlocutors directly experienced the encounter with the dead or whether they are relating stories experienced by someone in their social environment (relatives, friends, spouse, etc.), or whether the interlocutors report that they were intentionally trying to communicate with the deceased, or the deceased had begun to communicate with them. In this sense, we can categorize these experiences into first-hand encounters with the dead and general narratives about the dead (Bahna, 2019—but for further discussion, see Dégh, 2001; von Sydow, 1977).

As was mentioned in the introduction, this study is framed by the following empirical research question: What rituals and practices are invoked by experiences with the dead? In the following pages, I will analyze experiences with the dead and the practices they stimulate according to the criteria mentioned in this section.

Field research

The data presented in the paper were gathered during long-term ethnographic field research carried out in a village located in the Horehronie region in central Slovakia in 2023 and 2024. The research site is located in an area that has received long-term and systematic attention in Slovak ethnography for almost a hundred years (see Mjartan, Plicková, 1974; Podolák, 1999). According to the latest census, the village has a population of just under 2,400 inhabitants and is characterized by a high prevalence of members of the Roman Catholic Church who are of Slovak nationality, by its agrarian nature mixed with local manufacturing companies, and by the intensive activity of folk music and dance groups.

The job opportunities in the industry and factories built during the socialist period in the second half of the twentieth century have now disappeared in Horehronie, mainly due to the sociopolitical and economic circumstances of the 1990s. Similarly, the collectivization of agricultural estates occurred much later here than in other parts of Slovakia. We are talking about a time gap of more than two decades, i.e. only in the 1970s. According to Jágerová (2008, p. 16), this contributed significantly to the high degree of preservation of many traditional cultural elements.

The field research in 2023 was conducted during the months of October and December. In that year, 16 ethnographic interviews were conducted with 16 interlocutors (11 women, 5 men). The field research in 2024 was conducted from March to November, and 38 ethnographic interviews were conducted with 38 interlocutors (28 women, and 10 men). All research participants (interlocutors) declared themselves to be members of the Roman Catholic Church and were born between 1930 and 1990. Pseudonyms have been used when referring to their statements. The descriptors for the interlocutors indicate the fictional first name randomly assigned to them, their gender self-identification, and year of birth. In addition to the interviews, I conducted participant observation at cemeteries, funerals, All Saints' Day celebrations, various ceremonies and rituals, folklore festivals, and everyday life activities. I strive to make participant observation an equal, not complementary, method to ethnographic interviewing during research. Such an approach potentially makes it possible to reveal, for example, whether the respondents are

merely reproducing norms or whether behavioral manifestations are also associated with their reproduction (see Shaver, White, Vakaoti, Lang, 2021)

Classification and analysis of ethnographic data

Dreams

The first example of an experience with the dead is their appearance in dreams. Kiliánová asserts that dreams involving ancestors and departed relatives or friends constitute a distinct and significant category of dream experience across both European and non-European societies. Research consistently demonstrates their notable frequency of occurrence (Kiliánová, 2010, p. 7). At this point, I will not dwell on the individual aspects of these dreams, and I will also not go into detail concerning their content. Rather, I will focus on the ritualized and non-ritualized practices that are triggered by these dreams, or narratives about dreams. Following Gabriela Kiliánová, I utilize the definition of narratives about dreams as "... stories that usually communicate the content of a dream as well as its interpretation and implementation." (Kiliánová, 2010, p. 8).

As an initial example, I will discuss the following case, which I observed, or rather overheard, while conducting participant observation. I had the opportunity to listen to a conversation between two inhabitants of the village during participant observation. I did not make an audio recording of this conversation because the context did not allow it. This observation took place after a Sunday Mass in June 2024. A man, approximately 60, and a woman, approximately 50, were talking on the church grounds after the Sunday service. The man spoke about a dream in which his deceased godparents had appeared. He said that his godparents had appeared to him in a dream, and he had the opportunity to talk to them, but he did not elaborate further on the content of the dream. At the end of the conversation, the man added that he must light a candle on the graves of his godparents - the act of lighting a candle is usually accompanied by a short prayer. The other participant in the conversation just silently nodded in agreement. The church in the research locality is in the same area as the cemetery; however, it emerged from the conversation that the man intended to light the candle not after the service but on another day. From the context of the observed conversation, it appears that the man wanted to light a candle because of a dream with his godparents.

Research participant Gertrúda-F-1946 recalled she had a dream with her husband two years after his death. This dream came to her on her birthday. Gertrúda's case does not represent an isolated exception, but rather a regularly recurrent phenomenon of a similar narrative in interviews with many interlocutors. Dreams of the dead often occur at

significant anniversary moments such as birthdays, marriage anniversaries, wedding anniversaries or death anniversaries. Gertrúda interpreted this dream experience positively, was very overjoyed about it, and even said that her husband had kissed her in the dream as well. During the interview, she stated that she still remembers her husband many times every day because they had a beautiful marriage.

Ethnographic research conducted in the research locality so far shows that these dreams evoke many reactions, i.e. both ritualized and non-ritualized practices. Very common actions include visiting the cemetery, praying and lighting a candle at the grave of the deceased, cleaning the grave of the deceased that appeared in a dream. Similar practices as consequences of dreams with the dead have been documented in the Slovak rural environment by Kiliánová among others (Kiliánová, 2010, p. 16–18; also, Jágerová, 2008). Other practices may include lighting a candle in the memory of the dead in the house of the deceased or one's own home and praying for their soul, or just deliberately reminiscing about their life.

I have come across the following interpretation more than once during field research: If a dead relative or friend appears to someone in a dream, it means that they are in the other world, and sometimes they are missing something in the afterlife (more on this below). It can also be interpreted as a reminder to the bereaved that the deceased are not forgotten. Another interpretation among the interlocutors is that the living must pray for the deceased because the deceased needs or craves prayer from their living relatives. This idea of the research participants is based on the idea prevalent in Catholicism of what happens to a person's soul after death. After the physical death, the soul undergoes judgment and goes either to heaven, hell or purgatory (the state of temporary suffering and cleansing) depending on the deeds and morals of the deceased (Ariés, 2020; Soukup, M. 2016; Soukup, V. 2016). According to the research participants, souls in purgatory can still be saved and reach heaven on Judgment Day, but that requires their purification. This purification also requires prayers from the living, which are dedicated to the souls in purgatory, and which will greatly help in this process (for discussion see, for example, Labracque, 2017; Malkovsky, 2017; Sim, 2015). The interlocutor Agata reflected on this topic as follows:

There were dreams of the dead that came to say goodbye. They appeared in a dream. Dreams such that even though the dead [person] lay in the house, he was standing by you alive in the dream. I touched the dead [body lying on the special table in the living room – author's note]. I was not afraid. We still remember [our deceased family members and friends – author's note]. Thoughts we have

of them always. We still remember our deceased parents... my mom and my dad. We always need to pray. The soul feels it if you pray for it. The spirit is invisible. The little soul that deserves [prayer – author's note], whether it goes directly to heaven, or even to hell, or goes to purgatory. It is necessary to pray for him all the time. Because he needs that prayer to get there [to heaven – author's note]. (Agáta-F-1943)

As Astuti and Bloch argues, according to anthropological and ethnological research, there are several explanations for the high prevalence of agency of dead relatives and ancestors. Most of them have to do with how kinship systems are conceptualized in a particular society, culture, or religion (Astuti, Bloch, 2013, p. 113; also, Forth, 2009; Steadman, Palmer, Tilley, 1996; Stucky, Gardner, 2023).

Godparents in Slovakia play an important role in the lives of individuals and kinship relations, and this role might extend even to the afterlife. A godparent is a type of kinship established by the christening ritual. After the biological parents, they represent not only the child's closest relatives but also their spiritual guardians in the religious sense. In case of the death of the parents, the godparents are expected to take care of the child (Botíková, Jakubíková, Švecová, 1997). The institution of godparenthood also creates new kinship relationships or strengthens existing ones and promotes the creation and strengthening of cooperative ties. Several ethnographic research studies conducted in Slovakia, including my own, show that if godparents live in or near the same locality as their godchild, there is frequent cooperation in low-cost everyday activities as well as in costly and exceptional activities—for example, building a house, helping to slaughter pigs, or doing long and arduous manual work. If the godparents do not live in or near the same locality, cooperation between the families is limited to exceptional activities (Uhrin, 2022, p. 60; also, Botík, 1999; Botík et al., 2001; Botíková, Jakubíková, Švecová, 1997). Perhaps for these reasons, dreams featuring living or deceased godparents may occur in this ethnographic context. At this point, however, I must underline that so far, apart from the above-mentioned case and one other ethnographic interview, dreams with deceased godparents have not been mentioned frequently by the research participants. When research participants discuss dreams with the dead, they most often refer to spouses, grandparents, children, brothers or sisters.

Practices performed after Mass

After the Sunday service, many residents of the locality go to pray at the graves of their deceased relatives. This practice is not only performed after Sunday services and ser-

vices on major church holidays, although it is most often performed after those services; it may be done after any service during the week. This ritualized expression of reverence and a particular type of love for the deceased may be motivated by previous experiences with them, but this is not always the case. As mentioned in the previous section, lighting a candle in a cemetery and praying at the grave may stem from a dream in which the deceased appeared. Alternatively, these acts may be performed as the anniversary of the deceased's death, birth, name day or marriage approaches. Some interlocutors report feeling the presence of the deceased during these prayers. Thus, in some instances, the experience may come before the practice, while in others, the practice may occur prior to the experience.

Praying at the graves after Sunday Holy Mass is also actively appreciated and encouraged by the local priest. According to the interlocutors, showing reverence toward the dead through prayer, lighting candles and cleaning the graves is the right thing to do from a religious point of view. The positive attitude of a religious expert regarding this type of religious behavior has a fundamental influence on the frequency of its performance (Bužeková, 2004, 2009, 2011, 2019, 2021; Bahna, 2021; Uhrin, 2019). The interlocutors emphasize the uniqueness of this custom; however, it can also be found in other rural localities in Slovakia (see Botík et al., 2001; Jágerová, 2008). I suppose that besides the encouragement of this type of behavior by the religious expert and the high number of members of the Roman Catholic Church, there is also a practical aspect that plays a role here. The church and the cemetery are in an enclosed, fenced compound. The house of mourning stands only a few meters from this fence. The interlocutor Božena speaks of the topic as follows:

The local pastor also praised the fact that we go to pray at the graves after Mass on Sundays. This is not done everywhere in this region. But it is done here in our village ... Going to church feels like taking a rest.... (Božena-F-1946)

As we saw in the snippet of the ethnographic interview with Božena, according to her, it is necessary to visit the graves of the deceased and pray at them after every Sunday service. Although the importance of performing this practice is highlighted by many research participants, not all village residents are engaging in it. This is also confirmed by the participant observation I have done at many masses, after which not all participants went to the local cemetery to visit the graves of their deceased relatives. These differences in declaration and performance may be due to variations in the religiosity of individuals and families, in the degree of adherence to local religious norms, or to other factors whose existence further ethnographic research will potentially help to reveal.

The data from the interviews further indicate that the people “feel” the “need” of the souls, or their “call to prayer.” This “feeling” or “need” may manifest in dreams in which the dead appear, in the feeling or remembrance of the deceased during the day, during religious services, or at family gatherings at which family members who are no longer living are remembered. Interlocutor Beáta comments on these practices in connection with the limitations associated with the COVID-19 pandemic as follows:

When there were those restrictions [governmental restrictions related to religious life during the COVID-19 pandemic], we couldn't even pray the sorrowful rosary for the dead. There is no longer such reverence for the dead. We don't pray for them as much. You must pray for the dead ... they feel that you don't pray, and they say.... (Beáta-F-1949)

When asked how the dead communicate, that there is a lack of reverence towards them, the interlocutor responded with several seconds of silence and reflection. Later in the interview, it became apparent that the dead would appear in a dream, or the bereaved would be overwhelmed by feelings of grief, sorrow, and exultation mixed with gloom, and regrets associated with remembering the dead.

All Saints Day

Another time when experiences with the dead may occur is the holiday season, dedicated to respecting and commemorating the dead that is called *Dušičky*. *Dušičky* consists of the triduum of festive days, including All Saints' Eve on the 31st of October, All Saints' Day on the 1st of November, and All Souls' Day on the 2nd of November (Bužeková, 2024, p. 5; also, Horváthová, 1986; Popelková et al., 2014; Zajonc, 2014, p. 215–224). During this period, interlocutors report an increased frequency of praying for the deceased and reflecting on their lives and actions. This heightened focus is a typical feature of the festive season. Additionally, some individuals also mention experiencing more dreams about the deceased or a vague sense of their presence, though these occurrences are less common during this time. The interlocutor Agata briefly described the course of the *Dušičky* as follows:

The priest prays the litany near the big cross [situated on the hill just above the church and church grounds – author's note] a week before the celebration of the souls. He, the priest, was clad in white robes, but the rest of us were all dressed in black clothes. We give respect to the deceased. We pray to the Holy Father, to Mary the Virgin, to all the saints. You are connected to the dead because you are

at the grave, and that soul feels it. They feel it, and you know you are praying for them. That's the feeling, the feeling that that soul is at the grave and that you are there. (Agata-F-1943)

During this period, the family and relatives are expected to clean the graves and properly decorate them. Most interlocutors reported that in the early part of the second half of the twentieth century, home-made crepe paper flowers and young fir boughs were used to decorate the graves. The advent of artificial flowers and wreaths did not begin until the last decades of the twentieth century. However, the lighting of candles on graves during this period is considered by interlocutors to be an integral part of paying respect to the dead. Angelika describes this period as follows:

All Saints... It's different now, the Feast of All Saints. When I was a kid, there were no wreaths, just fir tree ornaments and crepe roses; it was more organic, and there wasn't as much waste. Families go to buy the wreaths, and everyone must clean up around their graves. We go to the cemetery and reminisce about the good things we had and experienced with that person. One should also go alone and have a prayer. Not only on All Souls' Day but also on Sundays. I always go to the graves to pray, but I prefer to go alone so that I can concentrate. (Angelika-F-1949)

During this holiday period, it is necessary to pray for the souls of the departed in purgatory, to remember one's deceased, to express respect for them, and to dedicate prayers to them, not only during collective rituals but also when praying individually at gravesides or home. Prayer can be considered an intentional and ritualized way of communicating with the dead. Such prayer towards the dead can take a highly formalized, rigid, and structured form (e.g. prayer during collective rituals through the holiday), but it can also take an individualized form, not characterized by such rigidity and bearing individualized elements (e.g. prayers by individuals towards the dead). From the statement of the interlocutor Akácia it appears that the collective prayers in the cemetery grounds, led by the parish priest, have a uniform character and a stricter structure. Individual prayers at graves, at the most within a circle of family members, are characterized by more individual features and less rigidity. The diversity of these practices is evident in Akácia's statement:

We pray in the cemetery, but also at the big cross. There is a mass and then a ceremony for the souls of the deceased. Praying for the little souls, for those who have died. Once upon a time, the graves were decorated with crepe paper flowers and fir tree branches. Now it's mostly wreaths and flowers. People have come

to appreciate the aesthetics of the graves. Also, we always go to the graves on Sundays after church service to pray. We light a candle, and we always make it there to make it good. (Akácia-F-1950)

The degree of involvement of the interlocutor

Another way we can categorize experiences and encounters with the dead is according to the criterion of involvement of the interlocutor. As mentioned above, in this regard, we can classify them into first-hand encounters with the dead (or any supernatural agent) in any form and general narratives about encounters with the dead (or any supernatural agent) in any form (see Bahna, 2019; Dégh, 2001; von Sydow, 1977). This classification refers both to the presence of the dead in dreams and encounters with the deceased in general.

On the basis of the ethnographic research conducted, we can say that the first-hand narratives were not present in every ethnographic interview. If they were present, then the presence of the deceased was most often manifested in dreams and feelings of the presence of the deceased's soul (for discussion see Palgi, Abramovitch, 1984; Rosenblatt, Walsh, Jackson, 1976; Marris, 1974). Another frequent experience was the deceased saying their last farewell (appearing either in a dream, dream-like scenario or during an ordinary day) to their closest relatives, e.g. spouses or children, after the funeral, or shortly before or after their death. This form of saying farewell to the bereaved represents one of the most common ideas falling into the category of folk religion (see Botík et al., 2001; Jágerová, 2008; Kiliánová, 2010) or vernacular religion (Primiano, 1995). Folk religion can be understood as faiths, notions and beliefs that are often closely associated with a particular group of people, ethnicity, or tribe, and often without formal and official sacred texts and creeds.² Concepts and notions originating in various folk religious traditions are often blended with the official religion that people adhere to (see Barret, 1999; Bužeková, 2004, 2021; Uhrin, 2018).³

Several interlocutors spoke of direct experiences with deceased family members who came to say goodbye, mostly within three days after the funeral. The respondents sometimes said that they felt the presence of the deceased in the house suddenly, out of

² For more on the definitions of folk religion, see <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2015/04/02/adherents-of-folk-religions/>

³ The division between folk religion (or vernacular religion—e.g. Primiano, 1995) is to some degree problematic or even untenable according to some authors since folk/vernacular religion and religious concepts largely overlap. Nonetheless, I believe that in some cases, it can be useful to work with this distinction, though it requires a considerable degree of critical reflection.

nowhere. They described this feeling as a sudden awareness of the deceased's presence, and did not associate it with fear or negative emotions in general. The presence of the dead could be manifested by a noise in some part of the house, the sudden closing of a window or door, a spontaneous fall, or the breaking of an object in the house. The presence of these sounds is not always attributed to activities of the of the dead but is sometimes rationally explained away by the interlocutors by referring to the actions of the natural elements, such as the wind, or to animals such as cats that were moving about the house's premises (for discussion Bennett, G., Bennett, K. M., 2000; Klass, 2015; Nenadalová, Řezníček, 2024). Less common was the interlocutor's account of a brief glimpse of the deceased himself or herself. In such accounts, the dead mostly retained the same physical form as they had before death. One instance of such an encounter in a dream is captured in an interview with interlocutor Angelika.

I had a dream about my dead husband. After his death, I dreamed about him. He came to see me in a dream and came to ask me for something. He came to ask me not to believe the false things and rumors that were said about him. There is not a day that I do not remember him. (Angelika-F-1949)

It did not arise from the interview what negative gossip the deceased's husband came to discuss, or rather deny, in the dream. Such first-hand experiences have a direct influence on the actions, attitudes, opinions, and ideas of those experiencing them. As Angelika's statement demonstrates, the influence of the dead can manifest itself in taking a stance on issues relating to morality and interpersonal relationships.

General narratives about encounters with the dead (or any supernatural agent) are often reproduced in the form of a story that includes the dead appearing in dreams. Research participant Adam says the following in this context:

One woman's husband died. She dreamed that the man was coming to haunt her...because she didn't give him a bottle of spirit to put in his grave at the funeral. One woman told her that when some other man died in the village, she had to give him a bottle of brandy to put in his grave, and he would give it to her husband in the afterlife. [She did that – author's note] ...and then he stopped haunting her. (Adam-M-1950)

In this case, the story refers to a man who was unhappy in the afterlife because his wife did not put a bottle of spirits in his casket at the funeral. The man appeared to her in a dream and asked her to make amends. What is interesting about this story is the idea that one deceased person can bring an object to another in the afterlife. The placing of

the deceased's favorite objects in the coffin during the funeral is one of the more widespread customs that were part of the rituals of the funeral cycle in Slovakia (see Jágerová, 2008; Kiliánová, 2010). However, these customs have been increasingly disappearing in recent decades. In addition to personal possessions, a prayer book or a rosary was also given to the deceased for the journey to the next world. This custom often persists to the present day. Many research participants also spoke of placing a coin in a white handkerchief, which is then placed into the clasped hands on the chest of the deceased. According to the interlocutors, this coin served as an *ofera* (fee) for the transporter of souls to the afterlife. The latter is interpreted as a vague, often nameless figure, with humanoid features (Botík, 1999; Botík et al., 2001; Botík, Slavkovský et al., 1995, p. 54-55; Jakubíková, 1997). To conclude, even though the interlocutor Adam is not an actor in the general narrative about the dead, we can observe the influence or agency of the dead man appearing in a dream on the actions of his still-living wife.

As Palgi and Abramovitch argue, in some research contexts, the interlocutors may have such first-hand experiences with the dead or may have prior knowledge of general narratives of this type, despite not discussing or mentioning them, or even denying their existence or validity during interviews. Palgi and Abramovitch suggest that there are many reasons for such denials (Palgi, Abramovitch, 1984, p. 405–406). It could be the interlocutor's questioning of the reality of such an experience, silence about the experience due to fear of a negative reaction from members of their group or questioning the experience for religious reasons. In the case of general stories, interlocutors may reproduce them during an ethnographic interview but brush them off the table and label them as superstitions not worthy of being trusted. If, for whatever reason, such an experience of an interlocutor is "lost from the research", then the possibility of revealing the agency of the dead is also gone. One way to avoid this methodological hitch is to conduct long-term ethnographic research and repeated interviews that create a rapport with interlocutors (see Silverman, Baroiller, Hemer, 2021). I am confident that through rapport building, this potential shortcoming will be addressed in the next phases of research.

The influence of the dead on the life, thoughts and actions of the living can be brought about by first-hand experience, but also through "evocation" in both ritual and non-ritual contexts. During an ethnographic interview with the interlocutors Anna (grandmother) and Albert (her grandson), Anna said the following:

What would [your] grandfather say to you? [speaking to her grandson – author's note]. What would he say if he knew you were doing something you shouldn't be doing? (Anna-F-1948)

In this case, the interlocutor is referring to her husband, the boy's deceased grandfather, and his unspecified reaction to certain behaviors of his grandson. What is not apparent from the above statement, but which is evident from the context of the interview, is that the grandfather's reaction would not have had positive dimensions. This assertion is based on the observation of the non-verbal of both interlocutors. In this case, the agency of the dead relative is activated through intentional action. I suspect that such means for achieving compliance with social and religious norms are quite common in many ethnographic contexts. These issues will be the subject of further research in subsequent phases of ethnographic research at the site.

Although many respondents do not declare first-hand experiences with the deceased, most of them often discuss rather general narratives about encounters with the dead (or any supernatural agent) in any form, that they heard from family members or close friends (see Bahna, 2019; Dégh, 2001; von Sydow, 1977). This second type of experience can take many forms and may also prompt the performance of rituals and ritualized practices. These forms of experiences often include narratives of dreams with deceased loved ones, or narratives of the dead saying goodbye to the living in dreams or outside of dreams, warnings to the still living of their impending death (for discussion, see, for example, Jágerová, 2008; Kiliánová, 2010; Tedlock, 2003)

During the field research in 2024 a resident of the village died. The deceased man had been battling a serious illness for a long time, to which he unfortunately succumbed. The news of the death spread through the village as quickly as the wind blowing from the nearby hills. The date of the funeral had already been announced at Mass on Sunday. The agency of the dead is activated immediately upon the death of a community member, which can be observed mainly from what Aruksak refers to as the "imaginings and rituals", or ritualized activities, activated at the time of death or death-associated events. Here it should be noted that Aruksak's original distinction (1998) is somewhat inflexible and overgeneralizing. For analytical purposes, his two basic categories should be broken down into several categories, which can be presented as follows: The first category consists of practical activities related to arranging the funeral and taking the body to the house of mourning. The second is composed of practices such as praying for the soul of the deceased, and dead souls in general, in the event of a death in the immediate area (see Bering, 2012). Such prayers may take place collectively in the house of mourning, the day before the funeral is conducted. This is attended by the selected family members as well as close friends, acquaintances, and neighbors. The closest relatives also pray alone in their homes. The third category consists of contemplation of the death and life

of the deceased. This means contemplating what kind of life the deceased led and what kind of death they died (see Ariés 2020 [1977]; Soukup, M., 2016; Soukup, V., 2016). When explaining and evaluating their deeds, residents often refer to religion and recite quotations like “you don’t know the day or the hour... God has a plan.” and many others. Such contemplations, as indicated by the research conducted to date, may trigger ritualized behavior in the form of prayer, lighting candles, visiting the graves of the deceased, etc. Thus, I suggest that the death of one person may trigger ritualized acts of behavior to show respect for, and remembrance of, other previously deceased persons. The fourth category is composed of reflections on death and life in general. This means that in these moments interlocutors may reflect not only on the death of the deceased but also on the death of their loved ones, the lives of their loved ones, and their own lives.

Conclusion

The results of the research show that rituals, ritualized behaviors, practices, associated ideas, and people’s experiences with the dead are multidimensional phenomena influenced mainly by the Christian Catholic religion and to a lesser extent by folk religion, or vernacular religion. As I have tried to demonstrate, both the experiences and practices can be analyzed and classified along several axes. Experiences with the dead occur either during collective or individual/solitary rituals (Bužeková, 2024; Bergen, 2019; Heelas, 1996) and can be elicited with the actor’s intention or can occur spontaneously (Jackson, Dillion, Bastian, et al., 2023). They can occur during highly ritualized, rigid, stereotyped rituals, and during rituals, ritualized behavior and practices that allow a certain degree of individual variability (Whitehouse, 2021; Xygalatas, 2022), and they can be contextually dependent or independent (Aruksak, 1998). Finally, these experiences can be first-hand encounters or any form of general narratives or notions concerning encounters with the dead (Bahna, 2019; Dégh, 2001; von Sydow, 1977).

As I have tried to show, these experiences may trigger the performance of rituals, ritualized behaviors, practices, or reflections about deceased relatives, or life and death in general. These activities are ritualized to varying degrees, have various degrees of rigidity and regularity of performance, and can be performed collectively or individually (Bužeková, 2024; Bergen, 2019; Heelas, 1996). For example, praying for the souls of the deceased during the mass is highly ritualized and structured, and performed on regular occasions. Although the lighting of a candle in the house or a saying a prayer in the home may occur on predetermined dates (the anniversary of the death of the deceased,

the anniversary of the marriage of the deceased spouse, important religious holidays etc.), it may also be performed spontaneously, because of a dream in which the deceased appears, or because of a first-hand experience with the dead. On the one hand, funeral and anniversary masses for the deceased are tied to a specific context, while on the other, the rosary prayer for the deceased can be performed essentially regardless of the context (Aruksak, 1988; Jackson, Dillion, Bastian, et al., 2023).

Rituals and ritualized behavior that begin to operate upon the occurrence of death (or a death-related practice) in the neighborhood, family, religious group, etc., or during funeral rituals, and major religious holidays (e.g. All Saints' Day) are in general more ritualistic, rigid, ceremonial, and obligatory for individual and the community. However, from the research and analysis carried out to date, it seems that the ideas connected to them might not be more rigid than the general death-related ideas and behaviors in daily life. The general death-related ideas and behaviors in daily life usually include more explanations regarding the experiences with the dead, agency of the dead, their role in the lives of individuals, and ideas about the soul and the afterlife. At the same time, these explanations do not have to be bound to customs, rituals, or commemorations, and can be more fragmented and contain some traits of non-Christian origin, e.g. ideas originating in folk religiosity or vernacular religiosity.

On the one hand, people's experiences are characterized by individual differences and specificities. On the other hand, some cases of experiences with the dead have similar characteristics. The practices and rituals are influenced mainly by Catholic doctrine rather than folk religion and seem to be more uniform. Compliance with these religious social norms is enforced not only by the residents of the village but also by the religious experts. At the same time, some contextually dependent and contextually independent death-related practices and ideas bear the characteristics of folk religious concepts. Analysis of the ethnographic data suggests that the agency of the dead in the lives of individuals in the rural environment of Slovakia is often experienced and reflected upon at an individual and personal level, even during collective activities.

The agency of the dead is usually manifested because of experiences with the dead and with death, which can prompt the performance of a variety of rituals and ritualized behavioral practices, as well as reflections on life and death, religion, moral values, norms, etc. In the same way, many rituals, ritualized types of behaviors, practices and contemplations can trigger experiences with the dead and again, in turn, trigger the performance of other related practices.

The analysis of ethnographic data shows, that the axes of rituals, ritualized behaviors and practices on the one hand, and the axes of experiences with the dead and with death on the other, are intertwined in the ethnographic data. Likewise, in some instances, the experience may come before the practice, while in others, the practice may occur prior to the experience. The ethnographic analysis presented here tentatively suggests that there may be a kind of circular relationship between experiences and practices, but one that is not closed; rather it is full of metaphorical nooks and crannies that require further detailed research.

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Povzetek

Namen tega članka je raziskati izkušnje ljudi z mrtvimi in s tem povezane obrede, prakse in ideje. Izkušnje in s tem povezane prakse je mogoče analizirati in razvrstiti kot individualne ali kolektivne glede na stopnjo njihove splošnosti, namen in togost, ter glede na to, ali gre za osebne izkušnje ali splošne pripovedi. Gradivo je bilo zbrano med dolgotrajnim etnografskim raziskovanjem v regiji Horehronie v osrednji Slovaški v letih 2023 in 2024. Raziskovalno območje zaznamuje visoka zastopanost članov rimskokatoliške cerkve slovaške narodnosti. Doslej opravljena etnografska raziskava kaže, da so obredi, prakse, povezane ideje in izkušnje ljudi z mrtvimi ter njihovo delovanje večdimenzionalni pojavi, na katere vpliva predvsem krščanska religija, v manjši meri pa tudi ljudska verovanja ali vernakularna religija. Delovanje mrtvih se običajno izraža kot odziv na izkušnje z mrtvimi, ki povzročajo izvajanje obredov, ritualiziranih oblik vedenja, ritualiziranih praks ali drugih dejavnosti, pa tudi kot posledica razmišljanja o moralnih in verskih vidikih življenja posameznikov in družbe.

Ključne besede: smrt, izkušnje z mrtvimi, delovanje mrtvih, ritual, praksa, etnografija, Slovaška

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