

Introduction: Agentive properties of the dead over time and in different social contexts

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Abstract

This special issue examines how the dead retain agency in social life, challenging Western ontologies that often deny their influence. Drawing on diverse ethnographic and historical cases, from postwar mass grave exhumations and migrant deaths to Udmurt commemorations, museum ethics, and rural rituals, it explores how the dead, in their material or symbolic forms, and in different social and cultural contexts, co-create social worlds. Focusing on concepts of relational or distributed agency, the issue shows that the agency of the dead emerges through interactions with the living, prompting a rethinking of the boundaries between life and death and the role of the dead in society.

KEYWORDS: death, relational agency, human remains, commemorations, rituals, memories

This special issue addresses the question of the relationship between the living and the dead, and examines possible understandings of agentive properties of the dead over time and in diverse social and cultural contexts. It originates in the ERC-funded project *The Roles of the Agency of the Dead in the Lives of Individuals in Contemporary Society* and an international conference organized in Ljubljana in 2024. The conference opened up and discussed the notion of the agency of the dead in a wide range of examples, theoretical frameworks, and cultural contexts. Death, the role of the deceased, and the relationship between the living and the dead are increasingly prominent and open in public debates in many societies, as well as a growing area of scholarly interest in various disciplines. In addition, questions related to death stimulate scholarly reflection on very general issues (the social status of the dead, different deaths, social taboos, symbolic afterlife,

memory, burial and disposal practices, etc.) as well as on very specific and socially pressing issues in certain societies (violent deaths, etc.).

The focus of this special issue is the notion of the agency of the dead, especially, but not exclusively, the dead in their material or symbolic forms (graves, bodies, corpses, memorials, rituals, presence in dreams) as part of social worlds. The dominant Western ontology generally does not provide a framework for lasting relationship with the dead and denies their possible agency in the social life. However, as some of the examples show, the agentive properties of the dead are enacted through active social relationships. The authors are not only interested in the manifestations of the dead, for example in rituals (see Uhrin, Anisimov), their material forms (see Repič, Krupa-Ławrynowicz and Sebastian Latocha, Hameršak and Lipovec Čebren) or their post-mortem life in new contexts (see Hamer, Mollegard), but also examine affects and influences caused by the material or symbolic presence of the dead and their capacity to direct, shape or transform social life. Several contributors show that the agency of the dead is always conditioned by the actions of the living and thus ground their analysis on the notion of relational or distributed agency (e.g. Berthod, Repič), which operates across the network of actors, places (graves, memorials...), practices (rituals, commemorations...), and objects (memorials, art objects...).

The first article, by Marc-Antoine Berthod, *An experimental grammar of relations with agentive dead*, reflects on the concept of agency in the relationship between the living and the dead, arguing that these relationships—whether with the dead in material form (corpses, human remains, etc.) or as entities they become after death (spirits, ghosts, etc.)—depend on the purpose of the living. The dead are not passive elements of the social world, nor can they exist on their own; rather, their agency is always conditioned by the actions and intentions of the living. The article elaborates on the concept of relational agency and proposes an analytical framework that accounts for variations in the relationship between the living and the dead, the way the dead are manifested, and the direction of agency, which influence types of actions and interactions. It also proposes an experimental analytical tool that accounts for the agency of the dead across different forms (bodies, entities, individual, collective), contexts (identified, unidentified), purposes of the relationship with the dead, and the direction of agency (who initiates and directs actions) in the social worlds of the living and the dead.

The following three articles elaborate on mass graves from the Second World War and the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and elaborate how the agency of the deceased is enacted through contemporary social relations. In the article *Mass graves and exhumations in*

Slovenia: Agency of the dead, their remains and the materiality of mass graves, Jaka Repič examines the transformation of the agency of the dead in mass graves from the Second World War, as these mass graves are investigated and human remains are exhumed. The article situates these processes in their socio-political and historical contexts and explores how mass grave research, the search for deceased relatives, and exhumations influence actions and transformations of the status of the dead. Similarly to the first article, it employs the concept of relational or distributed agency that operates across the network of different actors and argues that when mass graves are exhumed, human remains are transformed from inert objects into relevant actors in social and political life, endowed with the capacity to affect the individuals and catalyze broader social processes.

The article *The reversal of death: The impact of the Katyn massacre on the biographies of widows and orphans* by Aleksandra Krupa-Ławrynowicz and Sebastian Latocha explores the lasting impact of the 1940 Katyn massacre of 22,000 Polish officers and elites on the lives of the victims' widows and orphans. Their lives have been shaped both by the absence of their husbands and fathers and by their continued presence in memory. Since 1989—through exhumations, pilgrimages and public commemorations—the role of the Katyn victims has been redefined. Widows and orphans played a crucial role in resisting the erasure of the dead. Their experiences, once confined to the private sphere, were elevated into public discourse, embedding the victims within Polish cultural memory and national history. The article demonstrates how the deceased continue to affect contemporary society, as their physical absence is counterbalanced by their enduring presence in biomythographies.

Petra Hamer brings us to the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the 1990s. The article *The enduring agency of Fikret the smiling bodybuilder in Suada's journey*, examines the enduring agency of Fikret, Bosnia's first renowned bodybuilder, who was killed at the beginning of the war in 1992, through the experiences of his widow, Suada. She maintains a memorial room, preserving his memory as both mourning and celebration. The analysis identifies two forms of agency: material, expressed through physical markers like tombstones and plaques, and spiritual, manifested in Suada's dreams of connection and guidance. Framed by Verdery's concept of the politicization of dead bodies, the example shows how personal remembrance intersects with collective memory, highlighting how the dead continue to shape cultural meaning and social space in post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The following two articles focus on deaths that occur away from home. Marijana Hameršak and Uršula Lipovec Čebren situate their study of deaths along the Balkan migration route, arguing that they expose the tensions created when names and bodies are separated. The article *Separated in death: Border deaths and agency of the dead on the Balkan migratory trail*, shows how relatives struggle to mourn without bodies, while locals face difficulties honoring nameless dead. This double absence of bodies on the one hand and names on the other generates agency of the dead through the livings' efforts to grieve and commemorate. Based on ethnographic research since 2020, the article shows how border regimes and racialized logics sustain disappearances beyond life, embedding border deaths in hierarchies of visibility and care. The analysis reveals how structural violence shapes mourning and remembrance, making border deaths both intimate losses and collective disruptions in migration contexts.

In the article *Outside the border of one's land: The practice of commemorating the dead who died abroad in Udmurt culture* Nikolai Anisimov elaborates on how the Udmurt people of the Volga-Ural region of central Russia, comprehend death abroad as disruptions of ties between the deceased, especially those who died in wars of the 20th century, and their homeland. To restore these ties, Udmurt communities perform commemorative rituals that re-establish obligations to the dead and re-integrate them into collective memory. Drawing on fieldwork from 2013–2024 in the Udmurt Republic and neighboring regions, this article examines contemporary commemorations and their transformations under historical change, Orthodox influence, and legacies of wars. It highlights the Udmurt concern for the peaceful passage of souls to the realm of the ancestors. Symbolic burials, often demanded by the deceased, re-integrate the dead into Udmurt society and collective memory, and allow for the maintenance of links between the living and their ancestors.

The focus of Michal Uhrin's article *The role of the experiences with the dead in the lives of individuals in rural Slovakia: Practices & rituals* are the experiences with the dead—whether solitary or collective, intentional or spontaneous—as they manifest in dreams, religious practices, during festivities and commemorations dedicated to the dead, and other non-ritualized practices. The article demonstrates that the dead are not only perceived as the occasional presence of the deceased. Rather, encounters with the dead often lead to the performance of rituals, practices, or personal reflections about deceased relatives. Through ritualized and non-ritualized practices, the dead actively influence the social world, thereby shaping relationships between the living and the deceased.

The special issue concludes with an article by Kirsten Møllegaard, *Over their dead bodies: Facial reconstructions, ethics, and national storytelling at museums*, which explores how museums are increasingly using forensic reconstructions and digital technologies to create lifelike representations of ancient individuals. While effective for public engagement, such practices raise ethical concerns because they objectify once-living persons without consent and risk naturalizing links between ancient populations and modern nation-states. The article analyzes museum displays in Norway, Sweden, Denmark, and the United Kingdom, adopting a cultural studies approach to examine facial reconstructions and 3D animations. Drawing on scholarship, observation, and media sources, it examines how these practices re-inforce narratives of ancestry and nationhood, highlights ethical dilemmas, and reflects on the use of the dead in museums' mediation of national narratives. Contrary to other articles in this issue that explore the agentive properties and possibilities of the dead to affect the living, this article highlights the other side: the objectification of the dead in the museum context.

The editors and contributors to the special issue hope that these diverse examples will open the space for comparative perspectives and rethinking of our understanding of the agency of the dead. As Berthod points out, the notion of the agency of the dead determines the ontological quality of the deceased. Therefore, this issue also aims to loosen the presupposed understanding of a sharp line between the living and the deceased and their passive ontological status, showing the variations of continuing or re-emerging relationships. The editors of this special issue would like to thank all the contributors, the *DEAGENCY* project, and the general editors of the *Anthropological Notebooks*.

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AI disclaimer

The authors declare that no generative artificial intelligence was used in the preparation of this manuscript.

Povzetek

Posebna številka preučuje, kako mrtvi ohranjajo različne vloge v družbenem življenju, ter izpodbija zahodne ontologije, ki pogosto zanikajo njihov vpliv. Na podlagi raznolikih etnografskih in zgodovinskih primerov, od povojnih ekshumacij množičnih grobišč in smrti migrantov do udmurtskih spominskih praks, muzejske etike in podeželskih ritualov raziskuje, kako mrtvi v svojih materialnih ali simbolnih oblikah ter v različnih družbenih in kulturnih kontekstih soustvarjajo družbene svetove. Izhajajoč iz teoretskega okvira relacijske oz. porazdeljene tvornosti članki pokažejo, da se tvornost mrtvih udejanja skozi odnose z živimi, kar spodbuja vnovični premislek o mejah med življenjem in smrtjo ter vlogi mrtvih v družbi.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: smrt, relacijska tvornost, človeški ostanki, komemoracije, rituali, spomini

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