

# Death and the Dead Amidst Us. Death in contemporary society.

An international online conference at the Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology, Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana,  
organized by Mirjam Mencej

Ljubljana  
7 May 2021



## **Programme**

9.00-9.15

Welcome addresses:

Jaka Repič, head of Department

Mirjam Mencej, organiser

9.15-9.45

**Hesz, Ágnes (Hungary)**

Imagining the afterlife: knowledge construction about the dead and the afterworld in a Transylvanian village community

9.45-10.15

**Koski, Kaarina (Finland)**

Deceased relatives in nightmares

10.15-10.45

**Mencej, Mirjam (Slovenia)**

Ghost stories in post-war Srebrenica

*10.45-11.00 break*

11.00-11.30

**Hudales, Jože (Slovenia)**

Attitude of the local population to »their difficult heritage«: The case of mass grave of victims killed in June 1945 in an abandoned coal-mine schaft in Huda jama - Slovenia

11.30-12.00

**Repič, Jaka (Slovenia)**

Narratives of violence, death and mass graves as a persisting foundation of Slovenian diasporic identity

12.00-12.30

**Hameršak, Marijana (Croatia) and Uršula Lipovec Čebron (Slovenia)**

Researching border deaths in Croatia and Slovenia

*12.30-12.45 break*

12.45-13.15

**Belaj, Marijana (Croatia)**

Heroic death in religiosity and social cohesion

13.15-13.45

**Jiga Iliescu, Laura (Rumania)**

The holly grave as a multireligious shared site

13.45-14.15

**Kis-Halas, Judit (Slovenia)**

Angelic Presence in the Cemeteries? Transnational Angel Cult and the Material Culture of Commemoration

*14.15-15.00 break*

15.00-15.30

**Risteski, Ljupčo S. (North Macedonia)**

Death and laughter. Meanings and interpretations in tradition and in modernity. Examples from Macedonia

15.30-16.00

**Rupnik, Nika (Slovenia)**

Haunted houses. The Case of Rogaška Slatina

16.00-16.45 Students' presentations:

**Dečko, Nina (Slovenia)**

Contemporary channels of communication with ghosts

**Kropivnik, Luka (Slovenia)**

Communicating with the dead: case studies of various Slovenian mediums and individual experiences

**Anclin, Lea (Slovenia)**

Saying goodbye to our dogs: Funeral practices

## **Book of abstracts**

**Lea Anclin**, MA student, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia

### ***Saying goodbye to our dogs: Funeral practices***

Dogs as pets have a very important role in the life of individuals and saying goodbye to them can be one of the most difficult experiences. With the changing roles of dogs in our lives – they are becoming closer to people than ever – we are also witnessing new types of funeral practices. My focus is on researching such practices and emphasizing their use through stories of different individuals who had to say goodbye to their dogs. In Slovenia, we can find a cemetery for pets in Maribor, but still most people prefer to bury their friends in their backyard or somewhere special. As an alternative some people keep their ashes at home, get a tattoo of their dog etc.

**Marijana Belaj**, prof. dr., Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Zagreb, Croatia

### ***Heroic death in religiosity and social cohesion***

The paper deals with the way the death of a historical figure (from the Ottoman times) is locally perceived as a heroic death, and with the way this death is narratively transferred into a religious register, as a martyr's death. The memory of the event in which the hero/martyr died is situationally revived in the local landscape. The figure and his death are thus expressed in religious terms and practices, transforming the grave of the deceased into a sacred place. The memory of the death and the place where the historical figure died are constitutive in shaping individual religious lives, as well as in maintaining the sociability and cohesion of the local community. The paper is based on ethnographic research into the non-institutional sacralization of persons and places.

**Nina Dečko**, MA student, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia

### ***Contemporary channels of communication with ghosts***

Apparitions of ghosts and their attempt to communicate with the living are often explained with their need to fulfil some unfulfilled issues before being able to cross over to the other side. Ghosts communicate with people for different reasons and in various ways. Sometimes they visit their

friends or family members in their dreams, sometimes they haunt particular places in woods or abandoned buildings, such as castles and old houses. In the recent decades, ghosts also often choose to communicate with their friends and family members with the help of technology. In my presentation, I will be talking about some of these contemporary channels of communication. I will be focusing on the ways ghosts try to contact their loved ones via electronic devices, social media chats, phone calls and text messages.

**Ágnes Hesz**, assist. prof., Department of European Ethnology – Cultural Anthropology, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Pécs, Hungary

***Imagining the afterlife: knowledge construction about the dead and the afterworld in a Transylvanian village community***

Using the case of a Roman Catholic Hungarian village community in Transylvania the paper explores the ways in which knowledge about the afterlife is constructed and negotiated. While there are several traditions – official teachings of the Roman Catholic and Eastern Christian churches and vernacular ideas – informing people on what may happen after death, locals seem rather hesitant when expressing their own thoughts about the otherworld. Looking at ritual practices and discourses about the afterlife, the paper explores the various strategies people follow when they assess available knowledge about the afterlife and try to come terms with the unknown. It also draws attention to the creative potential of doubt and scepticism.

**Marijana Hameršak**, assist. prof., Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Research, Zagreb, Croatia, and **Uršula Lipovec Čebron**, assoc. prof., Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology University of Ljubljana, Slovenia

***Researching border deaths in Croatia and Slovenia***

Contemporary movements of refugees and other migrants across Croatia and Slovenia are made visible only exceptionally, as for example when their journeys are interrupted by death. Invisible in life people on the move become visible in death in multiple ways. After brief presentation of institutional and methodological framework of our transnational research of border deaths, we will try to outline different levels of visibility of border deaths in Slovenia and Croatia. In that, media representations of border deaths as accidents caused by nature will be confronted with perspectives of actors involved in their burials or repatriation, as well as with practices of grief activism and our own research findings, for example, map representation of geolocation of places of deaths.

**Jože Hudales**, assoc. prof. dr., Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology, Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia

***Attitude of the local population to »their difficult heritage«: The case of mass grave of victims killed in June 1945 in an abandoned coal-mine shaft in Huda jama - Slovenia***

The author will present the case of coal mine shafts in *Huda jama* ('Horrible cave') in Slovenia where the abandoned underground Barbara pit became a mass grave for hundreds of victims of extrajudicial killings that took place in the last week of May and in the first week of June 1945. Local population knew about people disappearing in the underground shaft; fearing repercussions, however, they did not dare talk openly about it. After decades of 'silence', narratives of violence and victims from *Huda jama* started cropping up in 2000 when the government (re)opened the abandoned shafts and (re)discovered the human remains. Since then, *Huda jama* mass grave has become a symbol of post-war massacres in Slovenia and has been appropriated by various political parties, and also by the local community, for very different goals.

**Laura Jiga Iliescu**, PhD, Senior researcher I, the Romanian Academy, the "Constantin Brăiloiu" Institute of Ethnography and Folklore, Bucharest / Associate professor, the University of Bucharest, Faculty of Letters, Romania

***The holly grave as a multireligious shared site***

More than a place of mourning, the grave represents the visible side of an ambiguous sacredness characterized by liminality, which favours the communication with the invisible realms of the dead and which embedded different faces of memory, as well. In the frame of the so-called *special dead* (in terms of Peter Brown) issue, I will approach the certain case of a Christian healer monk (father Elefterie), whose legendary (almost hagiographic) file is directly connected with a stone cross miraculously revealed and assigned by Christians, Muslims and, more recently, by bioenergy practitioners with therapeutic powers; an interreligious fluctuant community is coagulated around it. As a child, Elefterie was cured here; later, he became a medicine student and finally the prior of the very monastery founded around this spot. Nowadays, Elefterie's grave (with its own stone cross) and the previous therapeutic cross are included in the domain of Dervent monastery (the North shore of Danube, South-West Dobrodgea, Romania). My intervention aims to describe and to discuss the past

and present profile of the therapist as articulated through testimonial narratives shared among different pilgrims and visitor of this healing site.

**Judit Kis-Halas**, PhD, Marie Curie Postdoctoral Fellow, Dept. of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia

***Angelic presence in the cemeteries? Transnational angel cult and the material culture of commemoration***

The angel cult of the late 2000's emerged in the United States and since then its rapid spreading has been observed in the European continent. Today's angels are justly called "agents of the supernatural" as they are not only able to transcend religious borders but to intervene in earthly matters, too. This could be among the reasons why the new angelic belief – often described as a religion in scholarly discourses –has reached mass popularity in the Hungarian spiritual milieu by now.

Drawing on my long-term fieldwork among esoteric and spiritual communities in Hungary, the paper introduces the visual representations of angels in the culture of commemoration within the framework of the new angel religion in Hungary.

**Kaarina Koski**, PhD, senior researcher, Department of Cultures, Faculty of Arts. University of Helsinki, Finland

***Deceased relatives in nightmares***

Close relationships never really end in death. The presence and impact of the deceased in our life is manifold. While we strive to cherish the positive memories, the negative ones may affect us too. In my paper, I discuss the struggle of three women who had a problematic relationship with a parent and who had nightmares about the parent after their death. These women have written their stories in a collecting campaign titled "Death, Loss, and Memory", organized by the archive of Finnish Literature Society in 2014. Among the over 500 texts depicting death and fond memories, these bereavement narratives with nightmares were exceptional. Nightmares are a common reaction to a sudden death, but in these three, the issue was not the loss but the relationship.

My analysis of these bereavement narratives shows that people from our past – what they were and did to us and what we did to them – remain part of us. Nightmares can be signs of emotional turmoil and tensions in this legacy. Even though dreams are today defined as products of the mind, the point of old folklore still holds: when there is unfinished business with the dead, they will haunt.

**Luka Kropivnik**, MA student, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia

***Communicating with the dead: case studies of various Slovenian mediums and individual experiences***

In many cultures, losing a loved one represents a highly traumatic experience for an individual. The same was true in the past and is going to be true in the future as well. Bereavement is typically followed by a lengthy period of grieving, which may be, however, experienced as well as overcome differently by different individuals. Mediums allow some of them to opt for “communication” with the ones they lost. This communication, too, can be carried out in different manners. In this article, I present some stories of the people who have worked with mediums in order to “contact” lost loved ones. The research is focussed on narration and what visiting the medium might have represented for these individuals rather than the authenticity of their experiences. The symbolic world and self-presentation materials mediums use when marketing themselves are analysed based on data available on the internet.

**Mirjam Mencej**, prof. dr., Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology, Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia

***Ghost stories in post-war Srebrenica***

Based on field research, this presentation discusses the role of ghost narratives about the dead killed in the genocide against the Bosniak people in Srebrenica. It focuses on three clusters of belief narratives spread among the Bosniaks: narratives about the ghosts of the unburied dead, about the dead buried in the cemetery of the victims of the massacre, and about a killed imam appearing at the site of a demolished mosque, calling the faithful to prayer. The author argues that the ghost stories are the effects of the denial of the genocide by the Serbian population and of a strong sense among Bosniaks that justice has not yet been properly restored. Through ghost narratives, the Bosniak inhabitants of the Srebrenica region articulate and maintain their memory of the massacre, reclaim the space, and acquire some sense of control over the situation. Moreover, they occasionally serve as vehicles for the transmission of ideological messages in the post-war identity processes in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

**Jaka Repič**, assoc. prof. dr., Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology, Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia

### ***Narratives of violence, death and mass graves as a persisting foundation of Slovenian diasporic identity***

Among the Slovenian post-WWII migrants and their descendants in Argentina, narratives of violence, death, mass graves and rare survivors have played a special role in the construction and persistence of diasporic identities. Everyday life in the diaspora – after 75 years – is still permeated with collective memories of war and post-war violence, executions and burials in mass graves.

Narratives of violent deaths and of people buried in unknown and unmarked mass graves are represented as collective memories in rituals, social events, religious services and schools in the diasporic communities.

Moreover, the stories of and from the mass graves also fuel contemporary political antagonisms in Slovenia. The paper will therefore address the view from diaspora: of how they remembered deaths and mass graves during and after the war and how they understood and responded to the uncovering of some of these mass graves in recent decades.

**Ljupčo S. Risteski**, prof. dr., Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology, Faculty of Natural Sciences and Mathematics, University Sts. Cyril and Methodius, Skopje, Republic of North Macedonia

### ***Death and laughter. Meanings and interpretations in tradition and in modernity. Examples from Macedonia***

The ritual behavior of the living members of the community in relation to the morning for a deceased member, is established by ritual regulation that covers the roles, forms, ways of mourning, instruments, timing, simply each and every segment related to it.

An important segment of the customs related to mourning are manifested contrary to the expected behavior. Thus, in certain circumstances, mourning could be manifested through a ritual usage of laughter and other ritual forms that semantically bear inside them the meanings of life (the word, telling "dirty" stories, the game etc.), which are being opposed to the contagious death. In spite the ritual hiding of sorrow (hidden crying, hidden mourning) that has, in a semiotic sense the same meaning after all - not to let the negative influence of death take over - and manifesting of sorrow through a ritual utilization of talking, storytelling, "dirty" stories and other types of games or playing near the deceased have the same meaning: the living members of the community want to fight death with life.

**Nika Rupnik**, M.A. in philosophy and ethnology & cultural anthropology, Ljubljana, Slovenia

### ***Haunted houses. The case of Rogaška Slatina***

This research explores the context of narratives about hauntings in Vila Demetrović which circulate in Rogaška Slatina, Slovenia. It discusses common reasons for the rise of stories on haunted houses, which are: the appearance of the building; connection with death; change of ownership; violation of social norms; and, uncertainty as a product of personal or socio-historical transitions. The origin of ghost narratives depends on the situation of narrators. This study reveals the context of narratives on hauntings in Vila Demetrović by exploring the socio-historical situation of Rogaška Slatina; the history of the building; and the situation of people associated with the stories.