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Posthumous Culture of Montenegrins between Past and Present

The Pattern of Behavior

Abstract

Montenegro is a country with a valuable and long tradition which touches upon death as much as it does on life. Posthumous culture is peculiarly detailed and significant for the people, most notably in the earlier period when it represented the only foundation that held society together in difficult historical moments. This partially morbid way of self-expression of people has its roots in the politically and war-troubled past, often complicated and cruel to the inhabitants of Montenegro. The attention points to the many traditional aspects, unwritten rules, and customs differing from place to place but preserving the same function. From the type of clothes for the deceased, the eerie dirges uttered at the gravesite, to the male and female roles at the commemorations – the article handles the typical funeral processes with the help of two interlocutors. This paper aims to acquaint the reader with the manner of behaviour of the Montenegrins towards the phenomenon that occurs when a person in the community dies and how a typical family handles the situation. For the sake of the research, interviews with two subjects providing their perspectives were conducted. The significance of the research is personified by the sometimes contradictory stances of the people on death and the inevitable merging of secular and religious life.

Keywords: death culture, Montenegro, burial customs, deceased person, religion



The Generality of Death

One should start with death itself to discuss the cult of death in Montenegrin society. To ask the victim about it would turn out to be pointless, for “the dead cannot speak” in reference to the verse in Bible: “For the living know that they shall die: but the dead know not anything (...)”¹. In Montenegrin society, it is often said of the deceased, “*počinuo je*”, or in standard English “he can finally rest”, meaning that he finally released his life burden. However, when it comes to living, people insist that life is more difficult for them because they remain in this world to suffer and grieve for the deceased. This “trouble” can be considered the ultimate paradox and somewhat a comical tragedy of the Balkan people’s mentality in general.

According to the writing of Erdeljanović, the name Montenegro first officially appeared in 1296 in the Serbian king Stefan Uroš II Milutin’s charter from the Nemanjić dynasty.² The name of this country is similar to many others in the Serbian monarchy from the middle ages, and the meaning of the name lies in the Slavic toponymal name for giant, dense, and dark forests.³ In a metaphorical sense coinciding with the meaning of the name of Montenegro, the cult of death is also dark, pronounced, grotesque, morbid, and picturesque in performances. Some, like the Filipinos, see birth as the beginning of a new life in death. They do not see the death of their loved one as a tragedy but as a reason for rejoicing because the person in question goes to Heaven/eternal life if we look at it from a predominantly Christian point of view. Sabanpan-Yu, in her article, gives details that while holding vigil for a deceased one, Filipinos hold a banquet, play games, sing, and remember the virtues of the loved one gone.⁴ This differs from the Montenegrin mentality and predominantly Orthodox–Christian population. Too much joy and optimism at the moment of death equals great disrespect, indecency, mockery, and borderline madness. It is simple and easy to explain: as it is known in anthropological circles, “what is normal behaviour in one culture is not normal in another. Even psychological states are culturally determined.”⁵ In her *Patterns of Culture*, Ruth Benedict sees it as a human way of branding something as abnormal, while it just might

¹ Ecclesiastes 9:5. King James Bible 2001. (King James Bible: all subsequent citations are from this version).

² Erdeljanovic 1978: 34.

³ Krleža 1982: 716.

⁴ Sabanpan-Yu 2009: 233.

⁵ Barnard 2004: 103.

be a different normal for the other culture.⁶ This study explores the somewhat contradictory nature of Montenegrin mentality and its relation to death.

Montenegrin society always has one foot in the past and the other in the present, and thus carries historical, religious, and cultural treasures with one hand, while the other one is constantly grasping for modern life that rejects the conservatism of the past, judging it to be “narrow-minded”. Readers must be aware that for the average Montenegrin, a sense of national pride containing traditional values, customs, and beliefs is inseparable from a person, no matter how modern the present is. The rare minority rejects the past, its values, and social norms, but the majority drags the past well into the present. It causes problems in a country whose government ardently tries to follow the Western template of life as a blackmail element of political progress. Subsequently, this often seems disturbing for those not wanting to part with their roots.



Pic. Nr. 1: *Late Metropolitan of Montenegro Amfilohije Radović – reading a prayer over a dead Serbian soldier on Kosovo 1999. Photo: In4s*

A good example is the life and work of the late Metropolitan of Montenegro Amfilohije Radović and the controversial *Law on Freedom of Religion* against which he advocated. The character of Metropolitan Amfilohije was almost sacred for a large part of the population, so much so that he was nicknamed

⁶ Benedict 1935: 160.

“*Djedo*” (grandpa) due to his close connection with the Montenegrin people. The other part, i.e. the infuriated minority oriented towards Western values (often opposed to Eastern ones), considered his personality controversial. In an exclusive interview for the “*Glas Srpske*”, the late metropolitan expressed the view that for centuries Montenegro was a state based on Christian Orthodoxy, faith in God, led by the Serbian Orthodox Church. Throughout all those centuries, this religious pillar was attacked by various conquerors and communism. Today it is attacked by “vampirised” ideologies justified by European and Western values, as the late metropolitan stated in the interview.⁷

This article presents the family at the funeral and the customs in a plastic way: “Montenegrimi” stand on one side of the coffin, and “*Crnogorci*” on the other.⁸ The first renounce the Serbian origin of the Montenegrin state and do not recognize the Serbian Orthodox Church. The latter group admit everything Montenegrins deny and are at odds with them. However, the priest who incenses the grave is a Serbian priest, the cross has a name in Cyrillic (Serbian script), and each part is in different political parties that worship the mighty Euro and their interests. In addition, all of them are “modern people of the present”, but when they return from the cemetery, they wash their hands even though they may not have shaken hands with anyone. People who do this to protect against bad luck might also spit three times to the side on the way back “so that evil does not follow them”. They never return the same way because that is considered “unlucky”.

What is unifying for all those people? A man they loved or knew has passed away for death unites people and gathers all customs, beliefs, values, and deviations in one place. That is precisely why this article takes posthumous customs and people’s behaviour during them as the centre of the events described.

Everything starts and ends in a small but significant unit: a family. Wars, religion, and life-and-death issues affect a typical family community. Although it is said that death is a part of life, it is an unpleasant issue that, when handled appropriately, reveals a bigger picture of a whole nation. The reader will see how a typical Montenegrin family deals with the death of a loved one and how

⁷ Stojanović–Momić 2020: 1–24.

⁸ This is a regular division in recent politically evoked divisions between the pro-Serbian and ultra-nationalistic Montenegrins. “*Crnogorci*” is a word which translates to “Montenegrins”, used to denote “normal” Montenegrins who follow the Serbian Orthodox Church. On the other hand, “Montenegrimi” (the last letter is I) is a word which also translates in English to “Montenegrins” but has a meaning for the people who deny the Serbian roots of the Montenegrins and, thus, the Serbian Orthodox Church. The vocabulary is usually used by the Serbs in Montenegro or the so-called “*Crnogorci*” or “the normal Montenegrins”.

that process has changed over time. Suppose one wants to see the “postcard” of a Montenegrin mentality. In that case, one should visit the funeral of someone’s family member, for there sits the clash of positive and negative emotions bound with the strength of social norms.

This article presents information from the historical documents about the past customs in Montenegro, and conversations with two subjects with recent encounters with death, very different in age and generations apart. Comparison and description, with the informative conversation with interlocutors, make up the methods for satisfying social and scientific curiosity.

Three Phases of the Death Culture

The narrative revolves around the posthumous cult, the pattern of behaviour of a typical family in Montenegro in the event of the death of their member. This research introduces three large categories or phases that include rituals, ceremonies, rules, and the entire process from beginning to end:

1. The moment of death
2. Processes until the moment of burial
3. Processes during and after the funeral

Moment of Death

The time and place of death are essential because of the review of the past customs associated with a family and how it affects the modern one today. Therefore, when a family member passes away, it initiates a long grieving process. This occurrence is common for everyone, but the paths with procedures and obligations diverge here. People handle death differently depending on how and where it occurs.

Place of death, procedures, method of burial, and religious/political entanglements

Today, it is often the case that a person dies in the hospital, after which the staff in charge inform the closest family members of the deceased about the person’s death. At an online portal, the first of its kind in Montenegro, citizens can inform themselves about death cases. After death, the family must report

to the Department of the Health Center and provide all information about the late family member in the Registry Office.⁹ This corresponds to the citizen death registry law requiring the death certificate's details.¹⁰ Regarding funeral procedures, Montenegrins are not very comfortable with body embalment. Many funeral services do not offer this because the public sees it as a foreign procedure. According to Montenegrins, it deviates from the customs that emphasise respect for the body and image of the deceased and spiritual values. Many believe that additional trauma to the corpse would be morbid, modern, and anti-religious. Since Orthodox Christianity is the dominant religion, Montenegrins act per the stance of the Church that it is not Christian to mutilate the body additionally for the sake of a worldly appearance which ultimately, very importantly, includes the burial method.

The family can release the obituary in the local papers and there are less than several important ones that people in Montenegro read religiously. This official business, simultaneously a fascinating phenomenon, causes both old and young populations to check the newspapers for this section only regularly. The obituaries are always at the end of the papers with a picture of the deceased, kind words from the person releasing it, and details about the funeral and the mourning period. With modern times advancing, people release obituaries online on the mentioned webpage.

Usually, people choose the standard lowering of the coffin into the ground, two meters below the ground level. Families often already have their family tombs that are decades, sometimes centuries old. Related to this is fascinating information. Precisely because many families buy tombs in advance, people strive for them to be, as they say, in the "best place" or the "most popular" cemetery, no matter how oxymoronic it may sound. The best one is the closest to the city and the most organised, therefore it is logical to conclude that people want to visit the last resting place of their family members as often and as comfortably as possible. The late husband of one of the interlocutors for this article, Mihailo Čečović (husband of Leposava Čečović, who will be talked about later), expressed a strong wish to be buried in the newly opened cemetery in *Podgorica*. Although he was born in the village of *Ljevišta* in 1937, Mihailo stated that he wanted to be buried in *Podgorica* because he would have liked his family to visit his grave frequently. Some insist on the grave being in a sound and popular location, a particular social phenomenon. Private cemeteries are not nonexistent but are uncommon and, as for the burial of the clos-

⁹ *Umri.me* n.d. par. 4.

¹⁰ See The Parliament of Montenegro 2008: content of the death register Section 8.

est ones on their home property, as is often seen in the West, the occurrence is rare and for some bizarre. Exceptional cases in Montenegro are always linked to the wars and political-ideological internal conflicts that remain unresolved even to this day.

A terrifying example of that is the politically still unrecognised “*Pasje groblje*”, as named by the followers of Josip Broz Tito, also known as Partisans, in Montenegro. The term *Pasje Groblje* translates to “Mongrel Cemetery”. According to Radovan Kalabić, this crime was committed in 1942 on the day before Christmas, when the partisans brutally murdered 373 innocent civilians. Kalabić writes: “(...) In order to further humiliate them, their executioners left them all unburied, and no one was allowed to approach them. In Lug, on the right bank of the Tara River, next to the killed, they erected a wooden cross, on which they crucified the killed dog.”¹¹ Hence the name. Here we can see how ideological entanglements affect the mentality of people and how they perceive the burial cult. What was once considered sacred can easily be reversed and ridiculed. In the life of the Montenegrins, respect towards the dead was always cherished and seen as a good character trait to possess. Unfortunately, this is a fine example of how ideologies can uproot such strong feelings.

Regarding family graveyards, Montenegrins’ contradictory attitude and mentality regarding death are fascinating. In general, one gets the impression of them being horrified by it and not wanting to talk about it. With this goes a significant and frequent saying: “*Daleko bilo*” which loosely translates to “God Forbid”, or its variations “*Daleko bilo od ove kuće/osobe/doma*” translated as “Purify the evil away from this house/person/home”. Even more special proverb that has the function of driving away evil to prevent any cosmic connection or a chance that death is associated with them: “*Na zdravlje tebi/meni/osobi koja se dovodi u kontekst sa smrću*”, translated loosely as “May you/I/the person in the context with death... have a long life”. For example: “*Pokojni Marko imao je istu košulju koju sada ti nosiš, Petre, nazdravlje tebi*”, translated as: “The late Marko had the same shirt that you are wearing now, Peter, may you have a long life.” Here it is clear that the statement is harmless, but the fact that Marko is dead is not; therefore, Peter’s health should be hailed to avoid bad luck. This sentence is so frequent that it is said as quickly as possible, with the person also making a sign of a cross over their head and chest. Otherwise, one encounters the shock of the living person and disgust.

There is also a contradiction: when older Montenegrins reach their old age or feel that death is approaching, they often mention their burial place and ask

¹¹ Kalabić 1992: 72.

their families to either buy it, maintain it, or engrave their name in advance. At the same time, they fear death as if they had just been born. Sometimes these names had been engraved years in advance. Furthermore, many older people give specific instructions on what the family should do in the event of their death. They would be preoccupied with the clothes they would be buried in and what should be brought on the day of their funeral. There are many superstitions, customs, and pagan legacies that the Church could not deal with, but with time, it agreed to partially tolerate them for the sake of peace in the community. For example, additional shirts, shoes, and socks are placed in the coffin with the deceased's body, explaining that "the deceased would need a change of clothes in the afterlife". Death in Montenegro, as in many Balkan countries, is a vast and dark taboo, but also one that is broken at the moment of death and then, after the rituals have been performed, put under the lock and key again.

A Case When a Person Dies at Home, Past Customs and their Present Remains

Sometimes, when a person suffers from a disease for a long time, it may happen that the person in question requests from the family that, despite the doctor's advice, he/she must not be taken to the hospital but left for home care. In most cases, they also experience a panic fear that they will be taken to the hospital because they suspect the "sinister intentions" of their loved ones to "get rid of them". The reason for this is the firm conviction of both older people and those who are middle-aged in Montenegro that "the one who ends up in the hospital does not come out alive". From a conversation with 80-year-old Lepasava, a typical representative of an older woman with many health problems, with a pronounced fear of death and mistrust of doctors, the same sentence could often be heard.

Lepasava Čečović was born during the Second World War in Monastery Morača on October 20th, 1943. Although her roots undeniably tie her to her natural home in village Osredci, she did not mind living in urban surroundings where life was more manageable than in rural areas.

Lepasava regularly takes all her medication, goes for check-ups and is an example of how today's pills and ointments help with one problem while causing another. She may be older, but as her late husband said: *"A human being,*

the older it gets, the more it wants to live."¹² Her husband died recently after a short illness, and although his wish was never to end his life in the hospital, it was in the hospital that he breathed his last. She had a close encounter with death while battling cervical cancer. A morbid fact that she was aware of but never talked with, of course, was the mentioned element of a premeditated burial place. Even before she "was expected to die," her family (as it is practical in the community) thought and made arrangements about her final resting place. Luckily for Leposava, the plans were cancelled.



Pic. Nr. 2: *Lit Wax Candles*
in the Church of St. Archangel Michael, Montenegro, Piperi.
Photo: Ivana Radičević

Regarding her husband's final days, there was no other possibility due to the threat to his health, but at the very end, Leposava expressed her regret: "I wish I had taken him out of the hospital, at least so that he could die among his people."¹³

¹² Translation from the Serbian original: "Čeljade, sto postaje starije – sve više ima želju da živi".

¹³ Translation from the Serbian original: "Voljela bih da sam ga izvela iz bolnice, barem bi mogao da umre među svojim".

This was often not the case in earlier periods in Montenegro, when mistrust of doctors was even more significant, and medicine was certainly not at a satisfactory level compared to today's. Accordingly, people often waited their last days in their homes instead of in the hospital. In earlier times in Montenegro, religiousness had primacy and was the only or one of the main prisms through which one looked at life. When a person was accessed to be close to death, the family would call the local parish priest or, as they often call it in Montenegro, "*pop*".

The word *pop* is also a place of division in a symbolic sense. As archpriest Milošević writes in answer to the parish member's question, the matter causes division. The word comes from the Greek word "*papas*", which means father and in that context, it has a positive connotation, and the church approves calling the clergy by this word or simply "father". On the other hand, since the Turkish period, it also has a derisive meaning. It became standard throughout the Balkans, where the Turks derogatorily called "*pop*" all the clergy regardless of rank.¹⁴ Unfortunately, that negative connotation has taken root in the vocabulary of the Orthodox population in Montenegro.

A family member would light a wax candle for the deceased or someone close to death.

"The candle and its light symbolise Christ himself, who is light and who lights the way for the soul of every person who believes in him. Among the people, it is considered a great punishment and a curse if someone dies without a candle."¹⁵

The role of the priest is to say the last prayer, hear the last confession, and, if the person regularly fasted and went to church, give the last communion. In the family of Leposava, nominal Christianity dominated the mentioned customs from the past because of the strong influence of communism. A wax candle was lit at the grave sight without the priest's presence, which paints the picture of "one foot in the past, one foot in the present", in which something remained, and something was removed.

Processes until the moment of burial

This posthumous phase is particularly significant and interesting, including vigil and receiving condolences. Cajkanovic, in his work on Serbian religion

¹⁴ Milosevic 2009: par. 2.

¹⁵ Andjelkovic n.d.: par. 3.

and mythology, calls vigil the process by which Christmas Eve¹⁶ got its name, as well as the process of keeping the dead body overnight.¹⁷ Once arranged and ready for the ceremonial processes, the deceased's body can be displayed in two ways: in a chapel or the deceased's house. The most common location, preferred by the modern population of Montenegro, is the display of the body in the chapel. However, it is not uncustomary for the late person to be displayed in the home.

Chapel and acceptance of the condolences

When it comes to the first option, that is, exposing the deceased's body in the chapel; things are kept as secular as possible because if the procedure is not performed in the village, the city can be a place with various types of convictions. The family has the maximum freedom to organize the wake and receive condolences. However, precisely because of the different opinions and the environment in which people find themselves, customs that are specific and rare in modern times in Montenegro are reduced to a minimum or almost extinct. Therefore the body is first transported to the chapel, which consists of a simple-looking building with a smaller, empty room but large enough to accommodate a long table on which the coffin with the deceased lays and perhaps one small bench for the elderly. The rooms have no religious aspects. In the central and southern regions, it is customary to find that female family members stand in a semicircle around the coffin in the room with the deceased's body. The first in line is usually the deceased's wife (in case the deceased was logically a man), the mother, or the oldest female member of the family. After her, the other female members of the family are lined up in order of seniority and importance. At the very end, at the entrance, the male members of the family stand in a row outside. They are arranged similarly to women, in order of seniority and importance, but in a straight line: husband, father, son, brother, and other family members or relatives. In the northern regions, it is customary for male and female family members to stand inside the chapel, lined up in a semicircle around the body, with women at the head.

Everyone is invited to express their condolences, and the one who enters

¹⁶ Serbian word "*Bdenje*" might be seen as similar to the word "*Badnje Vece*" (Christmas Eve) and in context of *Badnje vece* (Christmas Eve) it denotes the time when Christians wait out the Christmas usually by joining the liturgy in the church.

¹⁷ Cajkanovic 1994: 56.

the chapel, bows to the deceased, makes a sign of the cross over his body (which is optional), kisses the picture of the deceased standing next to the coffin (also optional) and leaves flowers next to the coffin. After that, the person goes in order, from the first female member of the family to the last male member, extends his hand and says, "Accept my condolences" or simply "My condolences."¹⁸ There are many different customs, and sometimes it depends on the family itself, but the presence of the indispensable *tužilica*-s and *lelekač*-es is most often encountered everywhere. A *tužilica*¹⁹ or *narikača* is a female person, often an old woman who wails, laments and mourns over the deceased in an eerie, sad but shrill and penetrating voice. The function of these dirges is to tell about usually an honourable and just life of the deceased, expressing sorrow and sympathy with the family of the late person. Women who sing dirges experience this process as a calling that, once started, does not stop. Their "words have a magical effect; they have the power to prolong the memory, to provide the deceased with life beyond the grave (...)." ²⁰ Since it is a calling, their task is to visit the funerals of all the people they know and lament over the victims. This custom started in the village, where it is logical that everyone knew everyone. Therefore, it was quite normal to see a *tužilica* at every funeral in the village. Today in the cities, in addition to the fact that these old customs are almost completely forgotten, there are no such women everywhere, and the appearance of one at a funeral where she is unknown would be considered extremely unpleasant and strange. Today, especially among young people, there is a lot of intolerance against such traditions. However, older generations know to apply the rule that, as they say among the people, "one should not interrupt *tužilica*". There are different opinions, but it is assumed that stopping this woman from lamenting would mean bad luck for the family and maybe even a curse.

Vuk Karadžić, the great Serbian enlightener and reformist, called them "*narikače*", "*tužilice*". In his book *The Lives and Customs of the Serbian People*, he mentions, among many others, the *Zagorje tužbalice* from Montenegro, describing how there is always someone who knows how to beautifully decorate words and mourn: "When a person dies (...) brothers cry out first in front of the house: 'Woe to me, my brother!' Sisters around the house: 'Woe to me, my brother, my dearest!' Father and mother: 'Woe to me, my son, my happiness!'"²¹

¹⁸ Translation from the original in Serbian: "*Primite moje saucese*," "*Moje saucese*".

¹⁹ *Tužilica*: a woman doing the *tužbalica* which is "a dirge".

²⁰ Djuric 1940: 50.

²¹ Karadzic 1867: 179.

Concerning this exert, *lelekač* is a male person whose function is almost identical to that of a *tužilica*'s. The mourner's task, a man with a high and respectable status in the community, is to sing a lament of the deceased in a loud, deep, penetrating and, to many ears, eerie way. This morbid song can contain all the best and high praises for the deceased's life. However, sometimes it can contain admonitions to the family for the misdeeds of the late person and criticism on his account, especially in the case of suicides and murders. People consider it shameful to interrupt a *lelekač*. This duty is often an honour for the performer and the family. It is important to note that *lelekač*-es perform their acts outside the chapel (or in front of the family's house), facing the deceased's body, while *tužilica*-as sing their songs inside, next to the body. Most intriguingly, *lelekanje* is the process of mourning famously attached to the male Montenegrins. It is interesting to mention that only in Morača and Rovci males can sing dirges to a woman for an exceptionally honourable life, whereas in other places it is deemed inappropriate and even shameful. A tradition which is almost completely forgotten.

As mentioned earlier, personal items are sometimes placed inside the coffin and the body of the late person. One of the customs is that in addition to dressing the deceased in a dignified suit, the shoes are not on the feet, but one shoe is positioned next to the body, and the other at the bottom of the feet. One of the vague explanations is that "That's how it's supposed to be done."²²

Our second interlocutor, Marina Jacimović, was born in *Podgorica* on August 5th, 1995. At twenty-seven, she lost her mother due to bone cancer and had to abide by the rules of death at home. Marina is by all means an atheist, and although she does not believe in God or feel the need for dogmatic ceremonies, she abides by social commands. Unlike Lepasava's husband, who died in the hospital and was prepared by the staff, along with her brother, Marina bathed and prepared the body; the elders told her to put a favourite blanket of her mother's at the bottom of the coffin. In the meantime, a part of the unwritten rules was to get rid of all the clothes and items the family used in her mother's last days, and the person responsible was not to be from the family. When the condolences are accepted, the deceased's body is brought out with the table in front of the chapel, after which usually the eldest son or the most important and oldest male member of the family gives a speech. The custom does not include women except in cases where no male persons are close to the deceased or when the tradition is not followed. In the conversation with Jaćimović, she added that after the coffin was taken out for the speech, a selected person shat-

²² Translation of the original in Serbian: "To se tako radi".

tered a glass against the floor. On this occasion, it was done by Marina's aunt, her mother's sister.

On the other hand, at the time of Marina's uncle's death, the duty fell on his brother. Therefore, one concludes that the glass, shattered by a brother or a sister as a symbol of life, marks the end. After the speech, the table on which the body was placed is turned upside down or to the side, and the morticians take the body. Turning the table to the side or upside down also marks the end of life.

House and Vigil

In the past, it was quite a regular custom for all ceremonies to be performed at home. This occurrence is explained by the lack of facilities or the chapels in the village, but also by the time itself containing greater connection and closeness with loved ones, openness to life and death, much more frequent than today. People were less afraid of death and thus made fewer things taboo. In this case, the deceased would be prepared for the last farewell at home, which would include a ritual bathing of the body, usually by the closest and most often women as was the case with Marina Jaćimović. The deceased is dressed and displayed on the table in the house's main room. Sometimes, when the body loses its natural colour quicker than usual, older women smear wine on the deceased's skin to make it look more natural.

It is noteworthy to mention that in the case of Marina Jaćimović, it was a mixed approach. Her mother died in their home, was bathed, and prepared for the acceptance of the condolences at the same location. However, her body was displayed not in the house but in the chapel. On the other hand, the husband of mentioned Leposava Čečović died in the hospital and was prepared by the hospital staff and displayed at the chapel. Even while her husband was alive, she prepared the funeral clothes and additional personal mementoes, clearly belonging to an older group of people who harbour older beliefs. She also desired to put the blanket at the bottom of the coffin. In the case of the death of Leposava's son-in-law, who committed suicide, the ritual preparations and vigil were held in the deceased's home, after which the acceptance of the condolences was held in the chapel solely as an addition. By comparing these pieces of information from the three situations, the following was concluded: the two ways of handling the death of a person were followed correctly. The remaining situation in the case of Jaćimović stands alone as a mixture of the previous two and can be seen as a product of the contemporary, different approach.



Pic. Nr. 3: *A dead man turning into a werewolf.*
Photo: Ivica Stanković

Continuing with the procedure of the death at home, the closest ones would be looking after the late person, known as *vigil*, and older men usually do it. Then the condolences can also be received, during which the men are in the room with the body, and the women stand separately in another room. People in Montenegro call this process “guarding” or, in Serbian “*čuvanje pokojnika*”. People in Montenegro believe the guarding to be necessary so that nothing “out of the ordinary” would happen. For example, one of the superstitions is that one must watch the dead so that a cat does not accidentally jump over the body. People believed that if the cat jumped over the deceased’s body, the deceased person could turn into a vampire.²³ Becoming a vampire signifies, among the Balkan people, the phenomenon when the person rises from the dead, not by God’s will, but under the influence of dark forces. The vampire

²³ In Serbian this is called “*Povampiriti se*”.

then goes out with a desire for revenge, scares people, and sometimes harms them. Why the cat or some other animal – from the interviews with the interlocutors for this article, no one could explain accurately.

It is assumed that a certain superstition is involved if the animal is black. Many names, including a werewolf, also refer to the vampire.

“A werewolf is called a man (...) into whom (according to folk tales) some diabolical spirit enters after death 40 days, and revives him (turns into a vampire). (...) An honest man cannot become a vampire, but only if a dead thing flies over him or some other creature.”²⁴

In connection with this, in some places, older women usually thread a red string through the deceased’s skin, preventing the person from becoming a vampire. This common practice in the Balkans is still perceived as a form of protection against dark forces, spells, and hexes. In the opinion of the Serbian Orthodox Church, this practice is forbidden and considered unholy since many people who put red string bracelets on the left hand of their newborns do not know its origin. Unbeknown to many in the Montenegrin Christian community, red string presents a Jewish religious talisman, a great part of their folk customs.

“Rabbis (...) hand out red strings to those needing protection against the evil eye or medical or psychological help, especially for pain, infertility, or sickness. Those given the string are told it will protect them from the evil eye and bring them good luck. The phenomenon seems to cut across all sections of the Jewish population in Israel.”²⁵

All in all, guarding the deceased’s body was usually connected to the lack of advanced medical knowledge in the determination of death or cause of death. A person was often buried alive because death would have been determined prematurely. Today, this is called Lazarus Syndrome.

“The Lazarus phenomenon, or Lazarus syndrome, is defined as a delayed return of spontaneous circulation (ROSC) after CPR has ceased. (...) The syndrome is named after Lazarus of Bethany, who – according to the New Testament of the Bible – was brought back to life by Jesus Christ four days after his death.”²⁶

²⁴ Vasiljev 1928: 48.

²⁵ Teman 2008: 29.

²⁶ Whiteman 2017: 6–7.

Processes during and after the funeral

After all the duties, a procession of people follows the coffin and the family on the way to the grave site near the chapel. In Montenegro, the deceased's grave is often called the "eternal house"²⁷, referring to the last resting place of the late person. The funeral procession is led by a male person carrying a cross with details of the deceased (if the person is Christian), a male person carrying a picture of the deceased and optionally a priest if the family is strictly religious. It is noteworthy that the priest has the right to refuse the service at the grave of the late person if the death was by suicide since taking one's own life is considered the greatest sin in Christianity. In the book *From Day to Day with Patriarch Pavle*, the late patriarch expressed the clear views of the Orthodox Church that suicide is not justified because that way, the deceased loses the possibility of personal repentance. By dying in sin, a human being loses the right to requiem and the prayers of the Church, which are only possible if the person died in repentance.²⁸

The men carrying the cross and the photo are usually younger people close to the family, and the relatives agreed on this beforehand. The framed picture traditionally has a black band, called *flor* in Serbian, across its left corner to symbolize mourning. If a priest is present at the grave site, prayer takes place, the last words are said, and those present are invited, as is customary in Montenegro, for coffee and *rakija*.²⁹ This custom with its details varies from community to community. However, it functions to "refresh" the people who sympathised in grief and comfort the family by reminiscing about the happy moments in the deceased's life. At the acceptance of the condolences phase, before the funeral, it is often customary in Montenegro for the family to continually serve coffee, the inevitable *rakija* and cigarettes. Although it is not a strict rule, men usually carry the trays with drinks. A similar scene takes place after the funeral with indispensable food that is served as well as drinks, as the people say, "for the soul of the deceased" and with the phrase "*valja se*", meaning "for the occasion".

²⁷ In Serbian "Vječna kuća".

²⁸ Arsenijević 2018: 59.

²⁹ *Rakija* is the usual national alcoholic drink in most of the Balkan countries. It contains a high percentage of alcohol, and it is made from plums, grapes, or some other fruit.



Pic. Nr. 4: „Zadušnice” (All Souls’ Day) of a Serbian Family.
War years, 1914–1918. Photo: Unknown author

At the end of the mentioned events, it is clear that the family is entering a long period of mourning and grief, accompanied by many customs, with the most common ones singled out here. In Montenegro, after the death of a person, the family wears “*crnini*”³⁰, that is, strictly black clothes. The period of wearing black varies from person to person, and women take the lead. Wearing black in Montenegro is a special symbol fundamental to many parts of life in this historically troubled country. For women in particular, the black is a reflection of mourning in front of the community and a type of shield and armour against the release of grief from the person and towards the person. Usually, wearing this kind of clothing lasts a minimum of forty days for members of the immediate family, over a year or more. When a person is said to have “taken off his/her blackness/black clothes”, it means that he/she has finished the period of public mourning.

On the other hand, the mentioned forty days is a very important detail. Forty days is a process important mostly in the religious context. “For forty days, the soul of the dead wanders around his former habitat or the place where he died, and only then leaves; that time is not exceeded and do not jump over his grave, so it does not become a werewolf.”³¹ In addition, during these forty days, there is a belief among the Orthodox Christians that the soul of the deceased

³⁰ “*Crnina*” (nominative) or in English, “Black funeral clothes.”

³¹ To become a werewolf in this context is a synonym for becoming a vampire, see Kulisic et al. 1970: 56.

wanders and visits the places it loved most during its lifetime. After the funeral, as is the custom, the family go out for the second morning, which means that the family officially goes out to the cemetery once more to say goodbye to the deceased for the last time. After the end of that period, whoever had religious inclinations, commemorated the Church so that the priest could recite prayers for the deceased's soul.

Summary

From the perspective of the posthumous culture, it can be concluded that religious and secular life constantly intertwines in modern times in Montenegro. One can see clear examples and sometimes only traces of the past along with the customs and traditions it held at its core. Religious rules play a huge role in posthumous culture, but much of it is still a part of superstition, former paganism, or folklore residues of earlier times. Life and death are inseparable, and in Montenegro, death and the handling of death are still a serious taboo but also, contradictorily, a subject of interest and careful treatment. On the other hand, politics and its products in the form of wars and war-induced ethno-nationalistic conflicts create an immense influence. Customs and traditions are still important to the people of this country, despite the changing times, and under them, families care for their dead and prepare them for eternal life.

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