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## The Concept of Loneliness and Death among Vlachs in North-eastern Serbia

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### Theoretical overview

The majority of classical ethnographic works from Serbia have been published in the Belgrade scientific journal *Srpski etnografski zbornik (Serbian Ethnographical Collection)*. They were intended to offer a complete description of the traditional and spiritual culture from different regions of the country. This type of monographic works was also comprising topics like: signs of death (beliefs), dying, announcing death, washing the corpse, grave, grief, mourning, the custom of wedding of the dead, details about the funeral monuments etc. Nevertheless, in this respect only the consecrated monograph of Leskovačka Morava is representative (Radovanović 2000:25-26). More recently, attempts have been made, in the Serbian ethnology, to elaborate systematic reviews of the theoretical and methodological approaches to funeral rituals. We must mention here the classic ethnographic work, with elements of ethnopsychology, of Bojan Jovanović (Nikolić 2000). The analysis of informers' discourse about special funeral customs or discussions about death seems to be a very promising topic in the newest linguistic-anthropological works (Ćirković 2004 a and b, Ratković 2004).

Until recently, the Serbian ethnology and ethnography were mentioning the "Vlach-Serbian symbiosis" from North-Eastern Serbia. The Vlachs were called "members of the Vlach-speaking group", with whom "the cult of the dead is present at every step, so to speak" (Vlahović 1974:64). However, the ethnological research of the Vlachs, elaborated in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, consists only of classical ethnographic descriptions of individual rituals (Vlahović 1974, Zečević 1967, 1975, 1978, in the last period Antić 1995, Romelić 1996, 1998, Đokić 2000). Ethnologist Slobodan Zečević talks about *the Vlach ethnical groups, Carani and Ungureani* (Zečević 1978:384), but his works do not make any distinctions between the inhabitants of Northeastern Serbia. A good example in this respect is his study about the cult of the dead in the region around Zaječar. Besides Vlachs, there are also Serbians and Bulgarians, so the ethnical belonging of an individual custom can only be established if the name of the village is mentioned, because almost all the

villages here are mono-ethnic. One must keep in mind that all the existing ethnographic descriptions of the Vlachs were made by researchers who were not speaking Romanian and that all the field data were collected in the Serbian language. Coming from the other culture, the researchers from Serbia (and partly from Bulgaria) were fascinated with the Vlach "cult of death", "cult of after death life", "cult of dead". This scientific fascination aroused by the Vlach concept of death is, on the other hand, the reason why other aspects of the Vlach traditional life remained practically unknown.

In the last period, Vlach traditional culture has become the interest point of researchers who belong to the Vlach ethnical community. Ethnologist Paun Durlić, for example, analyses the fatalistic connection between Vlachs and death (Durlić 1995, 1996, 1997, 1998 – his works are also available on the site of the Museum from Majdanpek). We must also mention the collection of authentic texts, in the Romanian language, which accompany the Vlach funeral ritual (Gacović 2000 and 2001).

#### **New approaches**

Our method somehow differs from the previous ones. We started our researches following the principles of the Russian Ethnolinguistic School (promoted by Nikita Tolstoy, in the last two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century). In time, during our field trips, we became aware of the possible shortcomings of this method. Thus, the ethnolinguistic questionnaire became only part of our research and we also started audio recording the free discourses of the informers. Although not interesting from an ethnolinguistic point of view, the digressions were of more and more interest to us. So we reached a point where our research was closer to anthropological linguistics (of the Anglo-Saxon trends) than to the Russian Ethnolinguistic School. This was due, on the one hand, to enriching our methodology, that used to comprise traditional dialectology and the reconstruction of the spiritual culture, with sociolinguistics, and, on the other hand, to moving the focus on the interaction between researcher and informer. We started being also interested in subjective descriptions, personal narratives, and life stories as in objective presentations. Nevertheless, it all stemmed from ethnolinguistics. Our interdisciplinary and bilingual team, made up of both Serbian and Romanian researchers, made possible the interaction with the informers both in their mother tongue and in Serbian (all our Vlach informers are bilingual in different degrees). Thus we fulfilled more tasks: we obtained different perspectives on the same issues, according to the language in which the informer was speaking; we had access both to the insider and outsider researcher's point of view; we could connect and compare, in the end, different images that emerged from different discourses. Our discussions were no longer based on a strict questionnaire. They became only partially conducted, being more dialogical. In the foreground there

was no longer the object of the discussion, but the informer, involved in dialogue with the researcher.

Any fieldwork methodology reaches a point where it raises new research directions and where it should adapt to the reality of the field and turn to a new direction. This was the case with our starting method, which, on the way, has proved to be insufficient for our purposes. We started collecting more and more "waste" material, digressions and deviations in the informers' discourse that, from a strictly linguistic and anthropologic point of view, are just blank spaces, with the role of moderating the passage from one theme to another. So diverse questions were raised: What to do with all this material? What is it in fact? Can we use it the way we want? Here intervenes the problem of the researcher's ethics. The American scholars have introduced the concept of *linguistic gratuity* and proposed a model according to which sociolinguistic researchers might work productively with a community on language issues. The community-based collaboration raises deeper issues about the roles of sociolinguistic researchers in local communities (Wolfram 1998). Researchers should return linguistic favours to the host research community and establish collaborative relationships with local communities in ways that might benefit the community. Until now, our field trips in the Vlach regions materialized in raising awareness about this community, in the scientific world, through different studies, intended to offer a clearer picture of the Vlachs' spiritual culture (Sikimić 2001a, 2002b, Sorescu 2004b), to question the problem of their identity (Sikimić 2002a, Sorescu 2004c), to analyze different linguistic aspects connected to the Vlach identity or way of communication (Sikimić 2000, 2002, 2003) or to broadly introduce this community to the big public (Sikimić 2001b). We have also initiated the periodical publication of fragments from a comprehensive Vlach dictionary (Sorescu, Sikimić 2003). However, the questions of linguistic gratuity and returning the favours to the host community still remain partly unanswered.

#### **Material**

This study was conceived as a result of the one day fieldwork, September the 7<sup>th</sup> 2003, in the Vlach village of Boljetin, in North-Eastern Serbia. The inhabitants of Boljetin belong to the Ungureni group, which means they speak the *Bănăţean* underdialect of the Romanian language. The demographic dynamics of this village has suffered important changes during the years. Statistics show a small increase of the number of the inhabitants, from 1,257, in 1948, to 1,334, in 1961. After this date, an emphasized decrease can be noticed, until 1991, when the total number of the inhabitants was only 795. The decrease of the population continued after this date, too. The last census, from 2002, indicates that in Boljetin there are only 660 inhabitants (Census 2002). Our five interlocutors were all women, born between 1922 and 1933 and, except for one, all of them were widows and living alone for a long time.

Researching loneliness and solitude has been, until recently, the exclusive attribute of psychology, psychiatry and, to a certain extent, sociology. The linguistic-anthropologic field research that we undertook was not conceived to approximate the degree of solitude of the ethnical group. Answering the questions in the questionnaire, the informer tells a story which has been already sketched by the researcher. But the deviations from the questionnaire, the comments and stories of the informers outside the strict frame of the discussion focused on reconstructing the traditional culture – all these represent the story they want to tell to the researcher. These blank spaces are mapping a space that has been, until now, researched only occasionally. If, summing up in the end all the answers to the questionnaire, we can reconstruct the approximate image of a certain custom or ritual, the biographical narratives, divergent to a point, do offer us, by different means, the image of one and the same reality. In Boljetin, the image emerging from the informers' stories is that of lonely, old and sick women, without offspring or forgotten by these, overwhelmed by lack of communication.

### 1. Telling a story

As we mentioned before, the material we collected was not a result of direct interviews on the theme of old age or solitude. On the contrary, we obtained it by putting together sets of digressions or comments of the informers. These deviations from the questionnaire, blank spaces from the point of view of the strict ethnographic research, were mainly autobiographical narratives.

Lately, the interest in old people life stories, case studies and personal narratives has grown significantly. There are new border disciplines incorporating both the problem of old age and that of narration. One of them derives from medicine and is called *narrative gerontology*. Analysing four books on this subject, Ruth E. Ray talks about the important and necessary "narrative movement" in gerontology, which is characterised by a *change in perspective from paradigmatic (scientific) thinking to metaphoric (narrative) thinking* (Ray 2002:132). *Narrative* is defined simply as a story or an account of events told by a narrator. It is suggested that the contemporary interest in life stories, autobiographies and other forms of personal narratives reflects a general desire to fill the gap created by scientific and experimental study of ageing. *The world has many accounts of what ageing looks like from the outside, but we have little insight into what ageing looks and feels like from the perspective of older adults* (Ray 2002:132). On the other hand, there are new narrative movements deriving from anthropology, which have old age as their main interest point. *Anthropology and old age have been linked in many ways, which may be summarised as old age in anthropology, anthropology of old age, and finally, anthropology of age* (Keith 1980:339). Senior members of society have always guided ethnographers into traditional cultures. However, the territory of

their own lives as old people was seldom included in these tours. Consequently, old people as such didn't have any personal role in anthropology. This historically deep but narrow focus on old age has recently broadened into an anthropology of old age, which investigates the full topic of old age cross-culturally. The anthropology of old age has been essentially an ethnographic enterprise. It has attempted to describe the lives of old people in various social and cultural settings. Keith mentions several major anthropological concerns which appear in the anthropology of old age: the *holistic* concern with the influence of cultural context, the concept of *culture* itself, *diversity* in patterns of life in old age and the *emic* emphasis. The *emic* emphasis *attempts to understand the meaning of old age from the point of view of the old, or to observe old people among themselves* (Keith 1980:343).

The inside-out view of old people and in their own terms that anthropologists label *emic*, in the specific case of Boljetin, revealed a set of constants. The stories of all five women revolved around a few key-concepts. Starting from the burden of *loneliness*, they talked about *old age*, *suffering*, *disease*, *lack of communication*, *family loss*, *poverty*, to reach, in the end, the inevitable problem of *death*. It must be stressed again that all these narratives were not obtained as a result of direct interviews concerning old age (The most evident example is that of Informer no.3 and her answer and digressions following the question about *Sântoaderi*, evil horse-like creatures in the Romanian beliefs: (*The story about Sântoaderi?*) *Well, I suppose there was something. But I don't know. I was poor and surrounded by strangers. I've been surrounded by strangers till this day. (...) I've always been with strangers. My first husband died. I married another one. He died too.* etc). To use a term that G. Kenyon and W. Randall introduced, in their book called *Restorying Our Lives: Personal Growth Through Autobiographical Reflection*, all these narratives represent "the stories we are", meaning the set of stories people tell in different circumstances, regardless of the context, stories that define their identity and give voice to fears or wishes. A basic assumption of narrative gerontology is that *storytelling and story listening are not just things we do occasionally, rather they constitute the process by which we create and discover our personal identity as human beings* (Kenyon 2003:30).

### 2. The story of loneliness

Loneliness seems to be a subject difficult to approach both in quantitative and qualitative terms. However, sociologists show us that loneliness can be measured through different methods, using various scales (see, for example, De Jong Gierveld Loneliness Scale, an 11-item scale, including both positively and negatively worded items, used for measuring loneliness, in Peters, Liefbroer 1997). The intercultural researches distinguish sadder countries, with lonelier

inhabitants, or nations where the incidence of depressions or feeling of solitude is very low. Loneliness has been defined as *an unpleasant experience which appears when the net of social relations of a person shows a deficit in an important way, quantitatively or qualitatively*. (Peplau, Perhnari 1982). Loneliness has been consistently identified as one of the specific "social problems" which accompanies old age and growing older. Most people believe that old age is ordinarily a time of isolation and loneliness. This is thought to be true especially for older women who, because of differential mortality rates, are much more likely than men to spend long periods of time living alone. Thus the common conclusion is that older women, especially those who live alone, lead solitary and lonely lives (Essex, Nam 1987).

This is also the case with our informers. All but one are widows and living alone. The husband of Informer no.1 died fifteen years ago. When coming to this subject, she doesn't mention the grief over the loss, but the satisfaction that arises from fulfilling the ritual: *The years have passed and I still give for my man, ever since he died, because this is the custom with us. Fourteen years since he died. I gave, like this... I named for his soul. If you also name you know what it is about*. However, loneliness is overwhelming. She correlates being alone with not being afraid, because nobody can come to her: *I don't have what to be afraid of. I know nobody's coming anymore*. On the contrary, Informer no.4 and no.5 have a different view. With them, *I'm alone equals I'm afraid*: MD: *I'm alone. I had a sister, but she died. (And now?) MD: When evening comes, I close the door because I'm afraid, because I'm alone. (...) MŽ: You're afraid, I'm also alone. I'm also afraid*. Informer no.5 was married two times and both her husbands died: *I married my first husband. He died in war, in the first war... I married again, I had a child, it died, and at eleven he died. I don't have anybody*. Informer no.3 has been married three times. She outlived her husbands and also ended up being alone: *My first husband died. I married another one. He died too. After that I went where I live today. This one also died*.

Loneliness is rendered even more dramatic because of the lack of children and their support. Two of the informers report loss of their children at young ages. Informer no.1 doesn't have any children, but she mentions having raised up the daughter of her brother. However, she is not living with her anymore, and this is felt by the informer as the biggest trauma and loss. The largest part of the conversation revolves around her relation with her step-daughter:

*I'm alone. I haven't given birth. I don't have children. I don't have any children. I've raised up the daughter of my brother. I've raised her and now she got married. Well, ask God if her man would let her visit me. This I can't know: would he let her or not. Everybody's asking me: Are you with that girl? Well, I've been with her, I've raised her, but I don't know whether I would be with her because I don't know if her husband lets her to be with me or not.*

Two informers have children that are alive, but went away and don't visit them anymore. Informer no.3 says about her daughter that *she's not even asking about me*.

It has been claimed by scholars that elders with more family ties have been defined as more socially integrated and therefore protected against loneliness and depression, whereas those with few or no kin ties have been identified as vulnerable (Koropecky-Cox 1998). The results of our study only partially support these affirmations. While the discourse of our first Informer is frequently interrupted by bursts of crying (she is all alone: her husband died, she doesn't have any children and the feeling of solitude is overwhelming her), Informer no. 5 doesn't have any kin ties either, but she doesn't consider her situation a tragic one. On the contrary, she talks very cheerfully about death, funerals and meeting both her husbands in the other world. She and Informer no.4 represent the comic couple. They make fun of their old age and of their disabilities (*It was beautiful, but now we got into trouble. MD: Now we got old, what can we do?*) and talk with coquetry about the future meeting with their dead husbands. The discussion about the clothes to be worn at the funeral and about earrings greatly resembles any other small talk on totally ordinary subjects.

In the middle there are Informers no.2 and no.3. The husband of the first one is still alive. However, she feels lonely and acknowledges the fact that *we will die alone here*. Hence old age becomes the synonym for loneliness. Old people, even when living together, are still alone. Informer no.3, on the other hand, does everything in order to get close to somebody. Even if she doesn't have any kin ties anymore, she looks for the company of her step-daughter. In spite of the fact that she's treated with indifference (*Well, we greet each other, Good morning, Good morning, we don't argue, we don't anything. But each of us with her own job.*), she tries to keep close to the only living soul that she has any connection to. However, her position, defined by her own words, is an eccentric one. *I'm near them* doesn't imply that she overcame her loneliness, but that she is a mere attachment and, even worse, an unwanted one.

It has been said that old people resemble each other in living their solitude, old age being, like the other age extreme, levelling. This is totally false, the French psycho-geriatrists assure us: getting old is a process that induces diversity. The older we get, the more unique we become (Ionescu-Călinești 1999). The constants that sketch the construct called *loneliness*, for the old women of Boljetin, are approximately the same for all of them, but the attitude towards them differs from person to person.

### 3. Poverty and disease in old age

In the process of ageing, it is not the status of health and social relationships that is important, but a change in these characteristics. Losing a partner, deterioration of health and institutionalisation influence loneliness among elder

people (Tijhuis, De Jong-Gierveld, Feskens, Kromhout 1999). Apart from losing relatives and deterioration of health, the third factor that showed a great influence on old age in our study was increasing poverty.

We have seen before how losing relatives was felt by our informers. Let's now take a look at the impact of increasing poverty and deterioration of health upon their feelings of well-being. It's been acknowledged that, overall, the incidence of poverty among aged women is disproportionately high. Much of the writing on the topic concentrates on two types of explanations. The first type identifies living conditions or personal characteristics that appear to be associated with poverty, such as advanced old age or the circumstance of living alone. The second type of explanation centres on particular events, such as earning loss due to unemployment or retirement, widowhood, or deterioration of health that are plausibly linked to the onset of poverty among older women (Choudhury, Leonasio 1997). As far as poverty is concerned, three of our informers connect it to widowhood and talk about the very small pensions they get. Informer no.3 says that she receives some income from her last husband (*This one also died. Just that I have some pension from the last one*), but poverty is still overwhelming her: *When I wake up to cook, I cook if I have what, if I don't, I just keep silent*. Informer no.5 is in the same situation. Except for the fact that she was married twice and she has some pension from both her husbands: *He left me some pension. I also have some from the first one, who died in the war*. She is not complaining about poverty. Neither is Informer no.4. They are the only ones who seem to have overcome problems of old age and fear of death. They are not desperate, nor resigned. Moreover Informer no.4 is excited while talking about her future funeral, showing the clothes she will wear and dressing them up. Informer no.1 stands for the other extreme. Her discourse is all but a long lament about poverty, illness and loneliness. Talking about her poverty, she shows us the pension invoices. Poverty is no longer an abstract notion, but a countable reality. More precisely, 1.200 dinars per month: *He got employed pretty late, he has worked about ten years and now I have a thousand and two hundred dinars pension. What's that? How to live from that? How to live? The electricity is six hundred dinars. Six hundred. What is there left for me? I give six hundred and what's left for me? Do you get it?* She continues talking about her poor income and her discourse touches topics like her husband's death, deterioration of health and, in the end, the thought of her own death:

*My years have passed and... The years have passed and I still give for my man, ever since he died, because this is the custom with us. Fourteen years since he died. I gave, like this... I named for his soul. If you also name you know what it is about. I spent what was left. I have two hundred dinars left. I'm keeping two hundred dinars in case of something, if I have to go somewhere. I don't have money to buy anything (...) And I haven't died till now because I've*

*been working, but now I can't work any longer. I didn't work my land because I couldn't, because I can't walk, I can't work. My back is aching and my legs, I can't walk, I can't go to my land, I can't do anything. I gave up my land, I gave up everything. Yes, yes. I gave up working. I don't know how I'm going to live to the end.*

Researchers use the term *semantic illness networks* or *core symbolic element* to label the network of words, situations, symptoms and feelings which are associated with an illness and give it meaning for the sufferer. Core symbols are polysemic in the sense of linking up with different symbolic domains and including heterogeneous elements (Young 1982). In a case study mentioned in *The Anthropologies of Illness and Sickness*, A. Young notices that heart distress connects the following configuration: old age, sorrow and sadness, ritual mourning, worries about poverty, anxiety, interpersonal problems with particular relatives, nerves, madness, and blood problems. Core symbols link ideological elements to emotional-physical ones in such a way that the semantic network develops a degree of unity in spite of its complexity and heterogeneity. The discourse of Informer no.1 offers a very representative sample of semantic illness network, which connects illness to poverty, death, helplessness, loneliness:

*Who would listen to me when I don't have any dinar to give them to listen to me? (...) When you give them, he listens, when you don't, nobody listens to you, nobody wants to listen to you. And I would be very lucky if God took me now, when I can still walk with my stick, not to torture me to lie in bed, 'cause I don't have anybody to give me water. In the evening when I go to bed... here's the bed, here's the table. I put the glass of water and the drugs on the table to be in my reach, 'cause I can't stand up to fetch them. Do you know this? I'm telling you this as to my own daughters, I don't lie. Nobody knows everything that's there. Nobody cares.*

Though, the discussion between Informers no. 4 and no. 5, on the same topic – deterioration of health – is a surprising one. No semantic network is being configured, but the tone of the conversation switches from serious or neuter to self-ironic: *MŽ: How are you walking? MD: Well, you saw how. With a stick. I'm walking like on stilts. MŽ: I'm also walking with the stick, because I twisted this leg. MD: I didn't twist it, but I can't walk. It's all a wound. (...) I'm walking like a hen. When you hobble it. I can't anymore. Old age itself is regarded by the two women as "the big trouble" (MŽ: *It was beautiful, but now we got into big trouble. MD: Now we got old, what can we do?*). However, this doesn't imply sorrow or regrets, but finding of solutions for coping with the disadvantages of getting old. Old age is not preventing them to talk about*

fashion and to wait impatiently for the future, although this future is not what ordinary people would describe.

Finnish researchers have been writing about old age with respect to two repertoires: the necessity and the choice repertoire. The distinguishing characteristic of the necessity repertoire is that old age consists necessarily and unavoidably of deterioration (Jolanki, Jylha, Hervonen 2000). Illness and frailty are seen not only as inevitable signs of old age, but also as the very essence of old age, to which there is no alternative. In this thematic repertoire of necessity we can include the discourse of Informer no.1 and, to some extent, of Informer no.2 and no.3. On the contrary, Informers no.4 and 5 are mainly resorting to the choice repertoire when talking about old age. The main characteristic of the choice repertoire is that old age can be defined in various different ways. One can choose from a range of definitions the one that best fits in with the situation. The choice repertoire is used to undermine the necessity repertoire and to argue for a more "positive" picture of old age. Our two last informers are skilfully using both repertoires. They are not presenting themselves as totally independent, but neither are they completely overwhelmed by poverty or deteriorating health. Their discourse oscillates between soft lament, irony, self-irony, coquetry.

#### 4. The story of death

When reading through the anthropological literature, one is left with the impression of coolness and remoteness. The focus has always been on the bereaved, corpse or funeral rituals, but never on the personal reactions toward one's own death or the death of the beloved ones. According to Feifel, one of humanity's most distinguishing characteristics is the capacity to grasp the concept of objective death, to understand the limitation it places on the duration of life, and to react emotionally to it (Cicirelli 1998). Objective death is simply the fact of death: inevitable, irreversible and universal. Above and beyond the objective concept of death, personal meanings of death exist. They can be either multiple common meanings shared by members of society based on similar experiences, or multiple idiosyncratic meanings unique to the individual's experience.

In the case of Boljetin, we can trace three specific attitudes toward death.

#### "The other world" and intimacy with the dead

Twentieth century Western frameworks or models of grief have tended towards the assumption that grief will be "resolved" when survivors reach the point where they can emotionally detach themselves from the dead person. In so doing, they are not writing the deceased out of their lives but are instead allocating them a place within their own biography – at a point appropriate in time and space; in other words, as a memory. These models of grief emanate

from a scientific approach to mortality, born on modernity, one which relies for its validity on the assumption that life and death can be clearly divided from each other (Howarth 2000). The division of these two aspects, so characteristic for the Western modern thought and practice, hasn't still occurred with the Vlachs. "The other world" represents a mixing of beliefs and practices derived both from the religious ideology and from practical exigencies imposed by death. "The other world" holds a dominant position in the tradition of the Vlachs. The Bulgarian researchers, write about "the other world" with the Vlachs:

*It is preserved in the poetic and narrative folklore of the rituals, forming a compound complex of funeral and magic practices, whose use makes possible the communication with the world of dead; the mythologeme of heaven life is present not only in the conscious, but only in the non-conscious existence of Vlachs, as it is visible from numerous narratives about dreams about the world of dead (Anastasova 1999:37).*

Talking about biographical narratives about the other world, Iveta Todorova-Pirgova remarks that we can regard this type of stories as texts with intertwining "inherited knowledge" (acquired through education in the community culture) and "personal experience" (gained through its individual rationalisation in the context of the unique human destiny), elements of the conceptual model and the ideas generalising the individual life-time experience of the respective narrator (Todorova-Pirgova 1999).

We haven't specifically questioned the matter of "the other world" during our research. However, we have noticed a constant preoccupation of our informers with it. Only the belief in the existence of "the other world", similar to ours, can explain the satisfaction with which Informer no.4 showed us and dressed up the new clothes she was preserving for her funeral. At the question: *Do you have everything prepared for...?*, she answers proudly: *Eeeevrything. I have everything, towels and clothes, to give to people when I die.* The Bulgarian literature about Vlachs also attests this kind of attitude: *Only the belief that "the other world" is the same like this one or even better could explain the hurry with which an old woman from Bregovo insisted on showing us things that she had already prepared for the pomana (ritual offering for the dead) after her death. She started collecting the necessary clothes and things for this when she was only 40 (Grebenarova 1995:162).*

Informer no.5, admiring her friend's funeral outfit, though she doesn't use the term "the other world", nor any other expression denoting it, exclaims: *Aaa, look at her! When you go to your old man!* Informer no.5, on the other hand, has two husbands waiting for her there: *I have both a young and nice one, and an old one.* Talking about earrings, she says that she decided to keep on wearing

them because my husbands will pull one of them one earring, the second the other. As a natural continuation to this fragment, we can quote again the Bulgarian ethnologists:

*An older woman from the village Gorni Vadin, Orjahovsko region, who was talking about her already prepared pomana, showed us the following articles that she had already put in her purse for "the other world": earrings, necklace, perfume, powder, lipstick. At the question: What for the lipstick, old woman? she answered quietly and naturally: When I was young I used to put it and man is born again there, isn't he? (Grebenarova 1995:162).*

The discussion on the theme of death and reunion with the loved ones is also important from another point of view. Gail Kligman, in her book *The Wedding of the Dead*, makes a very important remark regarding the relations between living and dead, with respect to a village from Maramureş, Romania: *Maria's husband died very young; now, at her death, they will finally get back together. The relations between dead and living are continuous; Maria will join the family of her husband, not her own family, which she left after getting married (Kligman 1998:141).* Our two informers, although they also mention other dead relatives, only talk about the reunion with their husbands. "The other world", as the Vlachs see it, is the same as this one, obeys the same laws and there people generally continue what they started to do here.

Because of the blurred borders between this and the other world, the two informers' husbands are presented as part of their intimate network. The American anthropologists' recent studies suggest that there can be found patterns of intimacy between the living and the dead that mirror patterns found among living individuals (Troll 2001). The specific case of Boljetin supports this affirmation. In the absence of the context, nothing would suggest that the discussion between our last two informers is about dead persons. They are talking about clothes, fashion preferences, even handsomeness of the husbands who, although they died in different years, are together there: *MD: Miile was uglier. MŽ: What? MD: Miile was uglier than Uroš. Uroš was nicer.*

#### **Anxiety about own death**

Death anxiety has dominated recent academic research and provided one of the building blocks for the field of inquiry that is sometimes known as thanatology. We have seen before that a person's own dead can be regarded with impatience, when it's rendered the meaning of final reunion with the loved ones. But in Boljetin there are more approaches to the problem of death. One of them is that of our first Informer, who regards her own death as the final point of a long chain of physical pains: *I didn't work my land because I can't,*

*because I can't walk, I can't work. My back is aching and my legs, I can't walk, I can't go to my land, I can't do anything. I gave up my land, I gave up everything. Yes, yes, I gave up working. I don't know how I'm going to live to the end. The thought of dying in poverty is also overwhelming. But the biggest problem of all is solitude and the perspective of dying alone in the house, with nobody to give me water. It has been argued that death-related anxiety is the most fundamental source of despair and symptomatology in our society. Here, death anxiety is, in fact, the anxiety created by the quality of life until that very moment.*

#### **Shrinking of the family network and resigning**

While our last two Informers were including their dead husbands within their intimate network, Informer no.2, whose husband is still alive, doesn't make any mention of "the other world." She talks only about this world and about the shrinking of her family network, through the successive deaths of her relatives:

*One of them married a girl. And she leaves him... They had two girls. She leaves him and gets married again. And he gets sick because of the girls' sorrow. He gets sick and a little bit after that dies. My brother. And another one, eighteen years old, got bitten by a snake. (...) He got bitten right here, on this vein. Yes, that's right. And he only lived half an hour after and died. (...) And that one died too. And the eldest brother, that one... got married, had children and his eldest son died, his eldest son. He was married in Kladovo and he died in the bus. Somebody hits him and he dies. Like this. It was... I don't know how to tell you. Well, another sister again like this. The children started a fire and one of them pushed her in the fire and burned her. (Did she also die?) How else? She died.*

This vision presents a universe in continuous shrinking. The causes are multiple: death of the four generations of old people, leaving of the children, her consequent solitude, death of the relatives. This shrinking is rendered even linguistically. The village is no longer a home, a warm place, but a mere hole: *We got used to living in this hole.*

#### **Conclusions**

While most of the research about the Vlachs has focused on their very complex funeral rituals, we approached this community from a totally different perspective. The reality on the field made us place the emphasis on the informer and his or her feelings and attitude towards death. The biographical narratives that we obtained are the material on which this study is based.

As we mentioned in the beginning, collecting these life stories and using them for different research purposes raise the problem of the researcher's ethics. Do these people really want and need our involvement? Do they really profit in any way from this? What can we do in order to return the favours? Maybe it's time to pay closer attention to the needs of the host community and to try to start a real dialogue between researcher and informers, a dialogue that would bring profit to both of them.

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**Transcripts\*:**

**Informer no.1, Zorka Stanković (1929)**

*And after (the war) there was freedom. But... well... some freedom. When Tito was president. There was freedom, there was everything. Now we don't have anything any longer. Now we don't have anything. When Tito was president, the factories were functioning, people had salaries, women were working. Now there isn't anything. There are seven-eight-ten workers in these factories. All of them took the money and left. There isn't any work to be done. We don't know whether the factories are sold or not. We don't know anything. The priest in Majdanpek doesn't have a job. It's never happened before that a priest be left without job. There are more people who left than who stayed. We don't have anything here. We don't have shops, we don't have anything.*

*I'm alone. I haven't given birth. I don't have children. I don't have any children. I've raised up the daughter of my brother. I've raised her and now she got married. Well, ask God if her man would let her visit me. This I can't know: would he let her or not. Everybody's asking me: Are you with that girl? Well, I've been with her, I've raised her, but I don't know whether I would be with her because I don't know if her husband lets her to be with me or not. Because he's the only child... He doesn't have brothers or sisters, he will go to his parents, why to come to me? Because I'm alone. I don't have children. But when I went to my mother-in-law's they were sixteen in the house. My mother-in-law was wearing the cradle on her back when I arrived there. We've spent eight years there. And after that we separated. We moved in a rented house, go there, come here, go there, come here and my husband got employed very late because... We had cattle, we worked the field. He got employed pretty late, he has worked about ten years and now I have a thousand and two hundred dinars pension. What's that? How to live from that? How to live? The electricity is six hundred dinars. Six hundred. What is there left for me? I give six hundred and what's left for me? Do you get it? My years have passed and... The years have passed and I still give for my man, ever since he died, because this is the custom with us. Fourteen years since he died. I gave, like this... I named for his soul. If you also name you know what it is about. I spent what was left. I have two hundred dinars left. I'm keeping two hundred dinars in case of something, if I have to go somewhere. I don't have money to buy anything (...) And I haven't died by now because I've been working, but now I can't work any longer. I didn't work my land because I can't, because I can't walk, I can't work. My back is aching and my legs, I can't walk, I can't go to my land, I can't do anything. I gave up my land, I gave up everything. Yes, yes. I gave up working useless, it's no life here. Nowhere. Yo. I don't know how I'm going to live to the end.*

*It's u can't live. Ok, the youth can, so and so, but we, the old ones, for us it's the worst. We will die here, locked in the house. We can't stand up, we can't walk, we can't work.*

\* The original transcripts can be found in Sorescu 2004a. Our informers are speaking an archaic variant of the Romanian language, the Bănăţean subdialect, with many Serbian borrowings. Unfortunately, the translation can't render it exactly, but only approximate it.

*I have a Romanian daughter-in-law, you don't know that. I have a daughter-in-law, my sister from Majdanpek has a daughter-in-law, a Romanian daughter-in-law from... well... from... Turnu Saferin. Yes, right. Her name is Claudia. Eee, what a beautiful daughter-in-law, what a good woman... She can write everything, just like us, in Serbian. Everything! Well, the nephew from my sister. Only that he doesn't have children. They don't have children. She also has a brother. Her brother doesn't have children either. That nephew of mine has six shops. Very rich, they have a house here in Milanovac. They have everything, except for the moon in the sky, except for children. But she's beautiful, so beautiful, and she's... she's very respectful, and kind, and good and... I don't know how to tell you.*

*Right now a sister of mine died. She died at Troice, at Easter. Not at Easter, at... at Rusalii. We call it Troice. My sister died. She died, they found her dead. In Majdanpek. That's why I'm wearing this scarf. Because of her. Young, only sixty. She was not yet sixty. She died. It hasn't been too pleasant here, for some time, all alone, but now it's all the same. All the same. I'm not afraid. I'm not afraid at all. I don't have what to be afraid of. I know nobody's coming anymore. My husband also died. (When?) Fourteen years ago, almost fifteen. (Aren't you uncomfortable alone?) Well, I am, but what can I do? Where can I go? Where can I go away from home? I don't have anywhere to go. Well, I do, but I feel sorry to leave my house. I feel sorry to leave my house and close my door and go to somebody else's door. I feel so sorry.*

(discussion conducted by Annemarie Sorescu)

*Who would listen to me when I don't have any dinar to give them to listen to me? (...) When you give them, he listen, when you don't, nobody listens to you, nobody wants to listen to you. And I would be very lucky if God takes me now, when I can still walk with my stick, not to torture me to lie in bed, cause I don't have anybody to give me water. In the evening when I go to bed... here's the bed, here's the table. I put the glass of water and the drugs on the table to be in my reach, cause I can't stand up to fetch them. Do you know this? I'm telling you this as to my own daughters, I don't lie. Nobody knows everything that's there. Nobody cares.*

(discussion conducted by Biljana Sikimić)

**Informer no.2, Marica Marić (1933)**

*Back then we took care of four generations of old people. We were poor, we didn't have anything. But we managed. I buried grand-grandmothers. Two of them. I buried my mother-in-law, then I buried my father-in-law, then... But we will die alone here. Doesn't matter that I have a daughter and two sons. They are at their homes now. They went away, these are the times. The children left, everybody left, we remained alone. Yes. We got used to living in this hole.*

*We were a lot in my mother's house. They were rich, they were not poor. My mother didn't have brothers, my father didn't have brothers, didn't have sister. He had only one sister and she died and she didn't have anybody. They came from different villages, you know. One of them came from there, from Turija, the other one from Jesenica, and found each other and got together. And he said: if it happens, Vida, 'cause Vida was her*

*name, if it happens to get pregnant, don't try to change it, because this is all our family. My mother had thirteen children. But she's never complained. She died when her time came. She didn't lament that something is hurting her or that she needs something. She's been walking till her time came.*

*One of them married a girl. And she leaves him... They had two girls. She leaves him and gets married again. And he gets sick because of the girls' sorrow. He gets sick and a little bit after that dies. My brother. And another one, eighteen years old, got bitten by a snake. (...) He got bitten right here, on this vein. Yes, that's right. And he only lived half an hour after and died. (...) And that one died too. And the eldest brother, that one... got married, had children and his eldest son died, his eldest son. He was married in Kladovo and he died in the bus. Somebody hits him and he dies. Like this. It was... I don't know how to tell you. Well, another sister again like this. The children started a fire and one of them pushed her in the fire and burned her. (Did she also die?) How else? She died. Eee, lele... This must be human fate.*

(discussion conducted by Annemarie Sorescu)

**Informer no.3, Negosava Žurkić (1929)**

*My old man died. He died... It was three years ago. I'm alone in the house. I don't have anybody. I'm all alone. (And children?) I have a girl who went to Miloši. She's not even asking about me. (Only a girl?) Only a girl. Her father died in forty-three, in the war. After that I turn to some other old guy. This one has a girl... Well, we greet each other, Good morning, Good morning, we don't argue, we don't anything. But each of us with her own job. (It's very difficult, isn't it?) It is. When I wake up to cook, I cook if I have what, if I don't, I just keep silent.*

*(The story about Sântoaderi?) Well, I suppose there was something. But I don't know. I was poor and surrounded by strangers. I've been surrounded by strangers 'till this day. (...) I've always been with strangers. My first husband died. I married another one. He died too. After that I went where I live today. This one also died. Just that I have some pension from the last one. His daughter is in Switzerland. She has a pub here. That big pub is theirs. Well, I'm near them.*

(discussion conducted by Biljana Sikimić)

**Informer no.4, Milica Dokić (1925), Informer no.5, Milica Živković (1926)**

*MD: I'm alone. I had a sister, but she died. (And now?) MD: When evening comes, I close the door because I'm afraid, because I'm alone. (...) MŽ: You're afraid, I'm also alone. I'm also afraid. MD: I've been with Mărița. Well... With Mărița I was not afraid. Both of us. We would fight a little, make peace a little... Both of us.*

*MŽ: I married my first husband. He died in war, in the first war... I married again, I had a child, it died, and at eleven he died. I don't have anybody.*

*MŽ: It was beautiful, but now we got into big trouble. MD: Now we got old, what can we do?*

*MŽ: Aaa, look at her! When you go to your old man! (...) She looks so young.*

MŽ: *These are for death?* MD: *Yes.* MŽ: *Do you want them like this, handmade?* MD: *Yes, handmade, look! (Do you have everything prepared for...?)* MD: *Eeeevrything. I have everything, towels and clothes, to give to people when I die.* MŽ: *I don't want them handmade.* MD: *But how?* MŽ: *I like this fashion, not the old one.* MD: *A, I don't want this one. I don't want it... to put only the white scarf.*

MD: *Well, my husband died young, when he was eighteen. He hadn't even been in the army when they took him to fight in the war. (Eighteen?)* Yes. *He haven't been in the army. They took him because the war had started. And they took him. He survived three months and then got killed.*

MŽ: *He left me some pension. I also have some from the first one, who died in the war. With that one, I had a miscarriage, at three months. I didn't want it... It just died. After that he also died. I stayed a little bit with my parents-in-law and then I got married... I went to my parents and married the second time. I had a child with him. It lived three months and a week and died.*

MD: *I took them off when brother Mikaila died and I haven't put them back... I found them one day... In a box.* MŽ: *Why not to wear them?* 'Till I can still walk and when I die, with earrings... My husbands will pull one of them one earring, the second the other. MD: *Come on, they won't pull them.* MŽ: *I have both a young and nice one, and an old one. And I'm old. I just want to live a little bit more.* MD: *Mile was uglier.* MŽ: *What?* MD: *Mile was uglier than Uroš. Uroš was nicer.*

'MŽ: *How are you walking?* MD: *Well, you saw how. With a stick. I'm walking like on stilts.* MŽ: *I'm also walking with the stick, because I twisted this leg.* MD: *I didn't twist it, but I can't walk. It's all a wound. (...) I'm walking like a hen. When you hobble it. I can't anymore.'*

*(discussion conducted by Biljana Sikimić)*

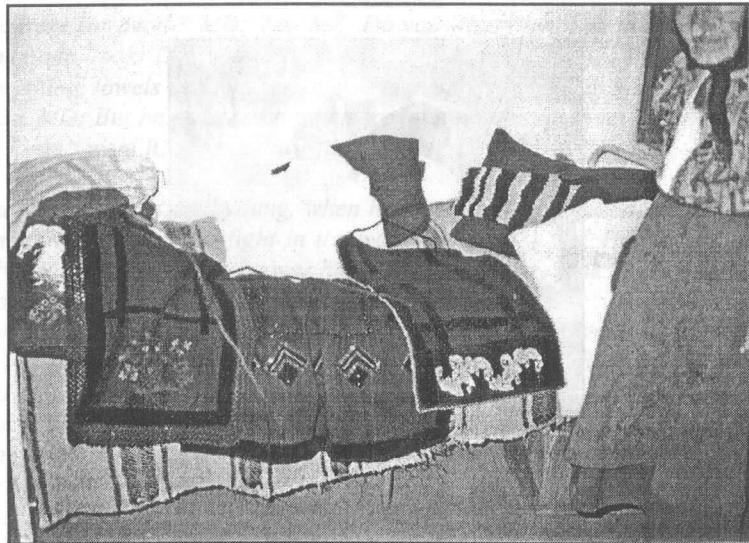
**PHOTOS**



*Milica Dokic in burial clothing (7 September 2003)*



*Milica Dokic in burial clothing (7 September 2003)*



The burial clothing of Milica Dokic (7 September 2003)



The burial dress of Milica Dokic (7 September 2003)

## Water and Death in Slavic Folk Beliefs and Customs

MIRJAM MENCEJ

According to numerous researchers of Slavic religious beliefs, there can be no doubt that the Slavs once held a mythical belief about the land of the dead being separated from that of the living by water. The notion is fairly well known throughout the world mythologies and also seems to be a common Indo-European mythical heritage (Lincoln 1982). However, most scholars concluded that the Slavs acquired the mythical notion from the Greeks and the corresponding burial ritual in the boat from the Scandinavian nations; only a few consider this mythical notion and ritual to be an "authentically" Slavic mythical notion and ritual (Niederle 1912:265-266; Krek 1887:431-2; Anučin 1890:93-100; Trojanović 1901:57; Schrader 1904:21; Clemen 1920; Fischer 1921:281; Unbegaun 1948:439; Váňa 1990:134-5; Mencej 1998). Nevertheless, we will take a look at some historical documents as well as folklore in order to get a better idea about the existence of this mythical notion among Slavs.

One of the most commonly cited historical sources which confirms the hypothesis that at least the eastern Slavs were once familiar with the burial ritual in the boat and the corresponding mythical notion of the land of the dead across the sea is a travelogue by the Arab Ibn-Fadlan from the 10<sup>th</sup> century, in which he recorded a purportedly Slavic burial ritual somewhere along the Volga. The report is interesting for our purposes due to the information that the dead were cremated in boats. However, many researchers believe that this was not the funeral of a Slav, but of a Scandinavian on Slavic soil – in this case this would of course be a Germanic ritual which apart from the location would have no association with Slavic rituals (Niederle 1926b:47).<sup>1</sup>

Another indicator which could prove the existence of a belief that the path to the land of the dead leads across water is a free translation from German into Czech from the 16<sup>th</sup> century. In the German text a man who is obviously fed up with his wife wishes that she...

"(...) *wer ein Ganss, und flüge übers Meer und keme nimmermehr heim (...)*".

<sup>1</sup> Z. Váňa believes that Ibn-Fadlan witnessed the funeral rites of a Russian man of some importance, but that they included elements of Norman and Slavic customs (Váňa 1990:137)