



Funerary Practices in Serbia

Aleksandra Pavićević

Funerary International Series

FUNERARY PRACTICES IN SERBIA

Funerary International Series

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FUNERARY PRACTICES IN SERBIA

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United Kingdom – North America – Japan – India
Malaysia – China

Emerald Publishing Limited
Howard House, Wagon Lane, Bingley BD16 1WA, UK

First edition 2021

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-78769-182-7 (Print)

ISBN: 978-1-78769-179-7 (Online)

ISBN: 978-1-78769-181-0 (Epub)



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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Assistance in gathering materials for this book was provided by the employees of the Public Utilities Company Funeral Services from Belgrade, Lisje from Novi Sad, City Parks from Čačak, Parks and Sanitation from Zrenjanin, Sanitation from Kraljevo, and Šumadija from Kragujevac. Photographs were obtained from the archive of the National Museum in Čačak, the National Museum in Niš, Museum “21 October” in Kragujevac, and the Museum in Prijepolje, as well as from professional photographers Željko Cajić and Saša Savović. I would like to give special thanks to my colleagues, curators Dr Violeta Obrenović, Dr Miloš Timotijević, Dr Dejan Krstić, Mr Nenad Ristović, Ljiljana Ljujić, and Aleksandar Obradović. For the purposes of this publication, maps were produced by associates at the Republic Geodetic Institute.

I would like to thank everyone for their selfless help.

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SERBIA: AN INTRODUCTION

The Republic of Serbia is, in a geopolitical sense, one of the countries of the Western Balkans. It occupies the central part of the Balkan Peninsula and the southern part of the Pannonian Plain. It is bordered by Hungary, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Albania, Macedonia, Romania, and Bulgaria, and has a land area of 88,499 km².¹

According to its constitution, “Serbia is the state of the Serbian people and all of its citizens, founded on the rule of law and social justice, the principles of civic democracy, human and minority rights and freedoms, along with the alignment with European principles and values.” Serbia contains two autonomous regions, Vojvodina, and Kosovo and Metohija. The official language is Serbian and the official script is Serbian Cyrillic. The capital city of Serbia is Belgrade.

The territory of Kosovo and Metohija has been under the administration of the United Nations since 1999. Kosovo unilaterally and unconstitutionally declared independence from Serbia in 2006 and though Serbia does not recognize

¹ https://www.paragraf.rs/propisi/ustav_republike_srbije.html. Acc. 12 November 2019.



Source: Republic Geodetic Authority.

Map of Serbia.

independence of its Southern Province, data about local contemporary funerary praxes are not available. This is why Kosovo will not be included in the text.

Laws in Serbia are made by the National Assembly by majority vote of representatives, during sessions in which a majority of delegates are present. The procedure by which laws are passed is outlined by the constitution of the Republic of Serbia. Laws can be proposed by any MP, the government, assemblies of autonomous regions, a group of at least 30,000 voters (with a signed petition), the ombudsman, and the National Bank of Serbia in areas within their jurisdiction. By

invoking existing laws, local city and municipal assemblies can pass bylaws in order to regulate the organization and function of certain social structures.²

The president of the republic and members of parliament are chosen in direct elections with secret ballots. Presidential and parliamentary candidates are proposed by registered political parties, coalitions, and civic groups. In order for an electoral list to be taken into consideration, it must have the backing of at least 10,000 citizens' signatures. Deputies are elected to four-year terms, while presidential terms last five years. According to the law, one can serve as president for a maximum of two terms. The president of the Republic proposes the candidate for Prime Minister to Parliament. The president may issue decrees as well as submit laws for reevaluation by Parliament insofar as he believes the law is unconstitutional. On the local level, candidates for municipal assemblies are selected in the same manner as candidates to the National Assembly.³

2 <http://www.parlament.gov.rs/akti/put-zakona.1068.html>. Acc. 10 February 2020.

3 <http://www.parlament.gov.rs/narodna-skupstina-/uloga-i-nacin-rada/izbori-i-izborni-sistem.906.html>. Acc. 10 February 2020.

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2

HISTORICAL FRAMEWORK AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF FUNERARY PRACTICES

Throughout history, funerary practices in Serbia were influenced by three main factors: the traditional cultural heritage of the Serbian population, the traditions and laws of the states ruling the territory inhabited by Serbs prior to the formation of the modern Serbian state, and the social-political changes of the end of the nineteenth century and the twentieth century. Death and burial throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were primarily characterized by religious worldviews. Processes of societal secularization became obvious in the first half of the twentieth century, and accelerated in the socialist and postsocialist periods.

In this chapter we will present the basic characteristics and development of funerary practices from the eighteenth century to the first decade of the twenty-first century. These developments were not always tied to geopolitical processes. As a result, the systematization of these historical periods

will primarily follow relevant occurrences pertaining to the (re)organization of funerary practices by the state, church, and local communities and the transformation of traditional modes of behavior (Box 2.1).

Box 2.1

A Short History of Modern Serbia.

The Principality of Serbia gained independence in 1878, and in 1882 was declared a kingdom. In 1918, as a result of pan-Slavic movements and ideas, the state expanded and was renamed the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes. The Kingdom encompassed the territories of Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Montenegro, and a majority of Croatia and Slovenia. It was renamed to the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in 1929. After World War II, the Federative People's Republic of Yugoslavia was founded (1945) and was renamed to the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia in 1963. The latter existed until 1991 when Slovenia gained independence, followed by Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Serbia and Montenegro remained united for the longest, until 2003 under the name of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, followed by Serbia and Montenegro until 2006, at which point these two republics became independent states.

2.1 BEFORE 1804 (FIRST SERBIAN UPRISING)

At the time of the birth of European modernity, the Serbian people lived in the territories of two empires, the Habsburg and the Ottoman, to the North and South of the Sava and Danube rivers, respectively. In both empires, Serbs were, due to their Orthodox Christian faith, considered “heterodox,” and thus were subject to special laws.

Ottoman authorities did not encroach too much on the *intimate* cultural and ethnic characteristics of their vassals' lives. State laws primarily concerned fiscal matters, that is, the amount and manner of collecting taxes from village administrations. Intrafamily life and the organization of communities in large part retained their traditional character. It can even be said that Turkish rule nurtured the conservation of traditional heritage that was and remains a strong cohesive factor and bulwark of identity of a community. This is especially true in relation to ritual life, that is, to the life-cycle rituals.

When speaking about funerary rituals, the primary requirement of the Turkish authorities was that Christian graves remain completely inconspicuous and that religious symbols remain hidden from the eyes of the Muslim public. Thus, funeral processions were not allowed to pass along main streets, near mosques, or other Muslim holy places, nor were they allowed to carry crosses.¹ Sharia law mandated that the graves of nonbelievers be distanced from Muslim ones and be fenced in so that crosses (or other religious symbols) would not be visible.² This period was marked by strict religious separation of graves. This was particularly important in urban centers due to the mixed religious and ethnic composition of the population. In Belgrade, for example, in the middle of the seventeenth century, only limited numbers of Christians and Jews were allowed to be buried in very specific plots.³ In practice there were also less tolerant solutions. One complaint

1 Фотић, Александар. 2005. Између закона и његове примене. У: Фотић, Александар (ур) *Приватни живот у српским земљама у освит модерног доба*. Београд: Клио, 27–65: 51. [Fotić, Aleksandar. 2005. Between the law and its application. In: Fotić, Aleksandar (ed.) *Private Life in Serbian Lands in the Dawn of the Modern Era*. Belgrade: Klio, 27–65: 51].

2 Фотић, 2005, 52.

3 Фотић, 2005, 52.

made by a Serbian Orthodox Church diocese in southern Serbia stated that it was forbidden for Orthodox believers to be buried in cemeteries and that the deceased had to be buried in forests and areas away from settlements.⁴

In Kosovo, there were noted examples of the existence of shared, ethnic and religiously mixed cemeteries of Serbs and Albanians. This can be interpreted as a result of the fact that the process of Islamization in the area was particularly intense, and thus a formerly Orthodox family would continue to bury their converted relatives in the same cemeteries.⁵

In any case, all deaths were required to be reported to the authorities. In the event of violent death, the State would exact a certain type of “penalty” from the village on whose territory the body was found.⁶ As a result, it was common practice for a deceased body to “travel” through several different territories until the report finally reached the authorities. Burials could only be conducted after being issued a permit by a state treasurer.

Death, burial, and the entire funerary ritual of Serbian population was under the jurisdiction of the Serbian Orthodox Church, which during Turkish rule served as the only active national institution and acted as a kind of substitute for a national state. Priests also kept records of deaths, although the records preceding the end of the nineteenth century were not quite accurate due to the low number of priests and their limited education.

4 Слијепчевић, Ђоко. 1991. *Историја Српске православне цркве*. II књига. *Од почетка 19. века до краја Другог светског рата*. Београд: Бигз, 125 [Slijepčević, Đoko. 1991. *History of the Serbian Orthodox Church from the Beginning of the 19th Century to the End of the Second World War*. Volume II. Belgrade: Bigz, 125].

5 Раичевић, Светозар. 1939. О старим српским гробљима у Метохији. Скопље: Штампарија ‘Јужна Србија’, 5 [Raičević, Svetozar. 1939. *Old Serbian Cemeteries in Metohija*. Скопје: ‘Southern Serbia’ Press, 5].

6 Фотић, Између закона и његове примене, 51.