

“IF THE SUN SHINES ON HIM ONCE MORE, HE WILL LIVE TWO LIVES”: EXHUMING THE DEAD IN EASTERN SERBIA

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ABSTRACT

Until the final decades of the 20th century, the Vlachs of Eastern Serbia practiced a rather unusual funerary custom about which very little was known: exhuming people who died very young 40 days after the funeral, so that the inconsolable family could see them once more. Apart from bringing peace and consolation to the family, it seems that the belief behind this custom was that if the corpse is taken out of the grave once more, so that the sun shines on it, the deceased would have two lives. The rare ethnographic references from the beginning of the previous century indicate a wider spread of the phenomenon in Eastern Serbia, among the Vlachs, but at the end of the 20th century, when the last exhumations were done, only a few villages in the Homolje region celebrated the custom. This paper draws on the few Serbian ethnographic sources from the first half of the last century and on the limited later mentions, and presents the narratives recorded by the authors in 2022 with Vlach interlocutors who had heard about the ritual, conducted it, or took part in it between 1970 and the 1990s. Special attention is paid to the area in which this phenomenon took place, situations in which the exhumation was done, and the beliefs underlying it.

Keywords: funerary customs, traditional culture, burial, exhumation, Balkans.

INTRODUCTION

The discussion about death and dying is as old as humanity. Few subjects stir the imagination and generate more interest than the study of how people across cultures deal with death and dying. Regardless of whether cultures are startlingly open in their dealing with death or taboo everything connected to death, the beliefs and the rituals connected to it not only reflect social values, but are also an important force shaping them (Geertz 1973: 98).

The study of humanity and humans has their mortality at its core. One of the objects of reflection and philosophical speculation, from Aristotle to Sigmund Freud, has been the corpse itself. In different cultures, the corpse is ritually honored and memorialized or brutally disposed of. Different beliefs stemming from various cultures result in different treatment of the corpse, including burial, cremation, submersion, embalming, exposure, abandonment, and exhumation. This diversity of cultural reactions is a measure of the universal impact of death; these reactions

are always meaningful and expressive and anything but random (Huntington and Metcalf 1979: 1).

Even though the norm of many cultures around the globe is that the dead should not be bothered, as cemeteries exist as resting places, corpses are sometimes disturbed through exhumation for a variety of reasons. Today, in the modern world, the removal of the corpse from the earth, a ritual practice in some traditional societies, is performed under various circumstances and for various reasons. For example, forensic exhumation has two aims: to provide legal evidence of human rights abuses that can be used in judicial processes and to bring closure to families of the missing by allowing the proper burial of the dead. Alternately, exhumation can be practiced for practical reasons. An example of this is when old bones are disinterred so that new bodies can be placed in already full cemeteries. In addition, archaeological investigations often involve exhumation.

In this paper, however, we focus on a particular exhumation practice from Eastern Europe which does not fall into any of the aforementioned categories, and about which very little was known: namely, the exhumation of the body 40 days after the funeral. The ritual was practiced until the last decades of the 20th century in several villages inhabited by Vlachs in Eastern Serbia, and the last documented exhumations of this type took place in 1992. However, due to its relatively taboo character, it is believed to be underreported. This article mainly draws on narratives recorded by the authors during 2022 in a few Vlach villages in Eastern Serbia, with interlocutors who conducted, took part in, or were told about the performance of the ritual between 1970 and the 1990s. We pay special attention to the area in which this phenomenon took place, situations in which the exhumation was done, and the beliefs underlying the ritual.

The Vlachs of Eastern Serbia are a Romanian-speaking population which settled in Eastern Serbia in a specific set of historical circumstances, mainly during the 18th and 19th centuries, coming from the territories north of the Danube which form present-day Romania (Sorescu-Marinković and Huțanu 2023: 24-42). As the Vlachs are known in Serbia for their so-called Vlach magic, complex cult of the dead, and what seems to be exotic rituals, it is not our intention to add to the sensationalistic corpus of texts. Our article reveals the existence, up to the end of the last century, of a ritual unknown in Romania or other neighboring regions in the Balkans: exhuming the corpse after only 40 days from the funeral or death. On the basis of the very scarce written testimonies and of the recent recordings from the field, we explain the reasons behind this practice and, at the same time, try to restore a segment of traditional culture which has been almost unknown to date.

EXHUMATION IN EASTERN EUROPE

The area under scrutiny, Eastern Serbia, is heavily influenced by Eastern Orthodoxy, as is the majority of Eastern Europe. In this region, burial is the standard method of handling the deceased. This practice is based primarily on the Orthodox religious belief that the body is a ‘temple of the spirit’ and must be buried in its entirety in order to make resurrection possible. Even though, as a rule, the bodies should not be disturbed from their ‘eternal sleep,’ ritual exhumation has

probably nowhere in the civilized world had a longer history and bodies have never been more troubled than in Eastern Europe.

The church's postulate about the radical separation of the soul from the body at the moment of death has entered the collective imagination extremely slowly, often undergoing additions and changes. This nevertheless comes as no surprise, because in the teachings of the Orthodox Church and Roman Catholic Church, as well as in popular practice and religiosity, sacred relics preserve the miracle-generating presence of the saints in this world (Cosma 2014: 103). This is the context in which we shall understand the fact that rest is not eternal in this area, where exhumation has been a very widespread phenomenon. Even though it is theoretically opposed by the church, paradoxically, in some cases, it has received tacit or open approval (Marian 1892, Hedeşan 1998, Tolstoy 2009, Cosma 2014).

There is no denial, however, that the most fascinating exhumations in this part of Europe, which have stirred the imagination of many writers and attracted tremendous popular attention and great scientific interest, are those of presumed vampires (Barber 1987, Dundes 1998, Lecouteux 2010). As Larry Wolff believes, part of the process of inventing Eastern Europe philosophically and geographically was to set literary works and academic studies in remote areas in Europe (*apud* Cosma 2014: 99). However, there is also an abundance of archival research, church, and ethnologic reports from the area, dating up to the 20th century, which report numerous cases of exhumation and mutilation of corpses as phenomena specific to a peasant society with a pre-modern vision of the world.

In many folk beliefs, vampires are considered to be corpses which do not rot for various reasons (most often connected to a taboo, prescribed ritual, or failure of a rite of passage), and who haunt, disfigure, torture or kill animals, members of the family, or of the village community (Hedeşan 1998). In 1746, a Benedictine monk mentioned a real "epidemics of fear of vampires" in the 17th and 18th centuries in Hungary, Silesia, Bohemia, Moravia, Poland, and Greece. In order to protect themselves, people would disinter and either burn the suspected corpses, or pierce the body with a stake (Cosma 2014: 119). Individuals with a belief in vampires and their exhumation and mutilation of corpses were widely encountered in Transylvania in the 18th and 19th centuries, as the folkloric material collected and published starting with the second half of the 19th century and archival documents attest (*idem*: 104–114).

Concentrating on the vampire and revenant legends of Eastern Europe, Paul Barber carefully analyses the few documented cases spanning centuries. Utilizing modern forensic pathology, he argues that the lore of vampires/revenants is an elaborate folk hypothesis to explain the natural phenomena of decomposition. Moreover, he remarks that vampire stories occur only in areas where the dead are buried, not cremated, and they tend to correlate with cultures with the practice of exhumation, as was the case in Greece, Bulgaria, and Serbo-Croatia (Barber 1987).

Contrary to common belief, as well as several laws passed by the imperial/state administration and recommendations from the church to put an end to such practices, there were many cases in which the priest was the one who initiated the exhumation of the corpse considered to be a vampire, from Wallachia

and Transylvania to Ukraine and Russia (Cosma 2014: 109-111). The exhumation of corpses suspected to be vampires extended well into the 20th century (see Djordjević 1953 for information about the South Slavic area), as the pressure coming from the secular and ecclesiastic authorities to eradicate these practices was only formal for a long time and was met by the strong resistance of a peasant society dominated by ancestral fears. Practices of protection used for generations and supported by the priests could not be suddenly abandoned by the contact with radical doctrines, propagated from the top down (Cosma 2014: 112).

As far as the Vlachs of Eastern Serbia are concerned, their vernacular religion has existed and flourished, untroubled by the Serbian ecclesiastic authorities for centuries (Sorescu-Marinković 2022: 315-318). Reports record complaints from Serbian priests in the 18th century who could not convince the Romanian-speaking Vlachs to go to church (Vitković 1884). There were only a few Romanian priests who came with the Vlachs from north of the Danube and after 1873, not a single one of them was left in Eastern Serbia (Djordjević 1924: 110). Even though the Vlachs of Eastern Serbia are Christian, the church has only superficially influenced their representation about after-life and the other world, “since the Church does not speak Vlach and the Vlachs do not speak Church Slavic language” (Durlić 2011: 45). Considering the fact that the Vlachs have been a geographically isolated, mostly rural, community which has had only irregular contact with the mass of Romanians north of the Danube for the last two centuries, as well as the fact that their complex of rituals and folk beliefs, most of which are concentrated on the cult of the dead, are regulating the existence of the community, it is less surprising that the exhumation ritual which we will talk about further was practiced until the last decades of the 20th century and was mostly unknown to the surrounding Serbian population.

“SO THAT THE SUN WARMS HIM ONCE MORE”: PREVIOUS ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH ON EXHUMATION IN EASTERN SERBIA

The Serbian ethnologist Tihomir Djordjević is the author of a seminal work about the Vlachs of Eastern Serbia, *Among Our Romanians: Travel Notes*. He documented his June 20–July 3, 1905 travel among the Ungureni Vlachs in Eastern Serbia in great detail, in one of the first field diaries in the history of Serbian ethnography. This work was published a year later, in 1906. Djordjević attested to the massive presence of the Romanian-speaking Vlachs in the region, basing his study on census data and personal observations, and approximated their arrival in the region to be in the 18th and 19th centuries from areas north of the Danube. Although he did not hesitate to include a great deal of ethnic stereotypes in his book, among which were that the Vlachs were savage, uncivilized, dirty, lazy, immoral, and unreligious, the work is nevertheless an important one. Apart from the fact that it offers one of the first documented mentions of the community, folk collections and ethnographic descriptions of the rituals practiced by the Vlachs, it contains the first reference to a “very interesting phenomenon”: digging out the corpse 40 days after the funeral so that the family can see the deceased once more. The Serbian ethnographer does not fail to say, nevertheless, that the priests forbade the custom, but the Vlachs do it secretly, during the night (Djordjević 1906: 284).

Djordjević goes on to say that in the village of Valakonje, people do not know about disinterring of the dead and the subsequent reburial, or at least they do not dare to openly talk about it. Still, the Serbian teacher he discussed with told him that about 15 years ago, a dejected mother in the village disinterred her child two months after the funeral to see it once more. In a footnote to this passage, the Serbian ethnologist tries to explain that this is probably a remnant of the double burial of the dead, a custom “which is even today performed by some uncivilized peoples”: initially the dead are buried, but after a few years, their bones are taken out of the earth, cleaned, and reburied in a different place.

In the same footnote, he offers the description of a double burial reported about in the Serbian newspaper *Štampa* in 1905, issue 258. It allegedly happened in Mladenovac, which was then a village 50 km away from the capital of Belgrade and today is considered a town:

In the village of Mladenovac, when somebody dies of tuberculosis in a house, they leave a small, round, inconspicuous opening with a cap in the lid of the coffin. When the coffin with the dead body is taken to the cemetery, before it is lowered in the grave, somebody from the family members slips a small bottle with red wine through the opening. After 40 days, the family members open the grave and, through the opening on the coffin lid, take out the bottle with wine, then give a bit to every child in the family, believing that this would protect them from the dead person’s disease. If there is no wine, an old corncob is cut and the same procedure is followed as with the wine, meaning every child eats a few kernels for protection. Even if this report was later refuted in issue 264 of *Štampa*, I know that this custom really exists in Mladenovac (*idem*: 285, translation ours).

One could easily guess why the report Djordjević talks about was later withdrawn, and why there are not any ethnographic descriptions of such a custom. Nevertheless, Djordjević seems to have been keen on finding out more and collecting more reports about the practice of exhumation. Twenty years later, in 1926, he published a short article in the *Gazette of the Serbian Scientific Society*, entitled *The Double Burial*, where he expands upon what he had written in his 1906 work on the Vlachs of Eastern Serbia, adding a few details and places in Serbia where the practice was encountered (Djordjević 1926: 530). From this later edit, it looks like the custom in the Vlach villages is nevertheless different from the ones mentioned in other regions, in that here, the reason for exhumation is not a practical reason or protection, but the great sorrow caused by the loss of a family member:

In many Romanian villages of Eastern Serbia there is the custom that, after one or two months, somewhere after 40 days or half a year after the death, the dead is unearthed so the family sees them once more, cries over them, kisses them and pours wine over them, and is buried again. The reason invoked is the too great sorrow for the dead, which supposedly is soothed (Djordjević 1926: 530, translation ours).

Djordjević ends his short ethnographic description by saying that similar customs probably exist elsewhere in Serbia, and they need to be described in detail and the reasons behind them thoroughly researched. Finally, he asks the readers to send these kinds of descriptions to the editors of the *Gazette of the Serbian*

Scientific Society. His request has stayed unanswered, at least as far as the Vlachs of Eastern Serbia are concerned.

A brief reference to this custom made a year earlier, in 1925, in an article about the customs and beliefs of the Krajina region in Eastern Serbia, inhabited predominantly by Vlachs, must also be mentioned. At the end of this short article, the author describes the custom Tihomir Djordjević paid close attention to, this time in the village of Jabukovac:

In the village of Jabukovac, until a few years ago, there was such a custom. Forty days or half a year after the funeral, they go to the grave and open it up, kiss the deceased, cry and sob over them, wash their face with wine, then bury them again. They make this to satisfy the longing and desire to see the deceased. I do not know more about this. I heard it from many people, and also from the local priest. In the summer, the village gives off an unbearable smell from this custom of theirs (Stevanović 1925: 400, translation ours).

It took almost a century until another account of the ritual in Eastern Serbia was published by Aleksandar Repedžić, one of the authors of this paper, on his blog in 2020. During Repedžić's field research, he met and talked to a Vlach woman who performed the ritual for her son, in the village of Debeli Lug in 1992. Repedžić writes:

Milica is one of the few women who exhumed her son so the sun could shine on him two times. Milica, who was born in the village of Laznica, heard from her parents that they used to disinter the dead, so she did the same for her son. Researching this custom, I found out that it was practiced in the village of Laznica during the 19th century, while in the village of Gornjane it was done until the 1970s. Milica's son died in his early 20s; he had a fiancée and was in the army when he was urgently transferred to the Belgrade Clinical Center and died soon after, from rapidly progressive leukemia. When he died, Milica tied a red thread outside the Clinical Center and unfurled it all the way to the village, as the Vlachs believe that the soul comes home following the red thread and this is the only way they can find their way home. As he died without a candle, the Heaven's candle¹ was also made, because the other world is imagined as cold, without water, and everything which is given to him in this world will be waiting for him in the other world as well. Because of the great sorrow for her lost son, during the *pomana*² ritual done 40 days after the funeral, Milica disinterred her son early in the morning, so the sun could warm him once again, as it is believed that like this he would go straight to heaven (Repedžić 2020, translation ours).

In this text and the following one, published a year later in *National Geographic Serbia*, Repedžić makes several general remarks about the ritual. He writes that the custom of disinterring the dead (Srb. *otkopavanje pokojnika*) was practiced until the end of the 19th and even in the 20th century in parts of the Homolje and Podunavlje regions of Eastern Serbia, which is inhabited by the Vlachs. The custom was usually done when a young person died. Forty days after

¹ The Heaven's candle is a richly decorated candlestick with intertwined bee wax flowers, mirrors and candles on top, made by hand by Vlach women during the night after somebody died without a lit candle. The Heaven's candle is supposed to light the way to Heaven for the deceased.

² *Pomana* is a traditional folk ritual by which the Vlachs send food and drink to the other world for the deceased.

the burial, the family of the deceased would come to the cemetery, open the grave and take the coffin out when the sun was rising. They would straighten up the coffin, take the lid off, wipe the face of the dead with a white scarf, then turn their face to the sun so the rays of the sun would touch them. After that, they would close the coffin again and put it back into the grave, and all funeral customs would be done as if the deceased had been buried for the first time that day. The custom was performed within the close family circle, which is why so little is known about it (Repedžić 2021).

Ethnologist Paun Es Durlić sees the ritual of disinterring the dead after 40 days, which he has also encountered in his field research from the last decade of the 20th century, as the best proof that the cult of the dead among the Vlachs of Eastern Serbia is founded on the postulates of *animatism*, and not *animism* (Durlić 1995: 233–237). Animatism, a term coined by British anthropologist Robert Marett in the early 20th century within the context of his teleological theory of the evolution of religion, refers to a belief that everything is infused with a life force giving each lifeless object personality or perception, but not a soul, as is the case in animism. Animatism, as Durlić sees it, is the belief that death does not separate the soul from the body, or that the separation is only temporary and irrelevant, as the afterlife is just an extension of the mundane. Consequently, the funeral customs of the Vlachs aim to equip the deceased for the ‘other world,’ and in the post-mortem cycle they are treated as if they were still members of the community, with active spiritual and physical needs that should be met as in life (Durlić 1995: 237).

Anthropological studies have shown that in many societies, some ways of dying are deemed better than others, while some types of deaths are considered bad. Likewise, there are certain times when dying is seen to be more or less appropriate, depending on the context. Among the many emic categories which characterize a death, the opposition between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ death is the best documented (Silverman, Baroiller and Hemer 2021: 5). Durlić also highlights that among the Vlachs, there is a clearly differentiated understanding between two types of death: ‘good’, regular death (VRom.³ *muarća ku rînd*), and ‘bad’, irregular death (VRom. *muarća fara rînd*). The first implies dying in old age, at home, in bed, with a candle in one’s hand, surrounded by one’s closest family members. The second, however, bad death, implies dying early or dying without a candle (VRom. *în njeğura* “in the dark”).

Therefore, Durlić continues, in the case of a ‘bad’ death, without a candle, the family is obliged to ‘send’ the Heaven’s candle to the deceased as soon as possible, which, as a rule, is made the night before the funeral. During the posthumous cycle, the family must also satisfy all of the deceased’s culinary needs. ‘Awakening’ the deceased is another important ritual detail, which means that no celebration is held in honor of the deceased without first inviting them to come and personally participate in it, by going to the cemetery in the morning, setting up a table with food, drinks, flowers, candles, and water. The smell of incense and flowers is said

³ The abbreviation *VRom.*, short for Vlach Romanian, refers to the archaic, regional variety of the Romanian language spoken by the Vlachs of Eastern Serbia (see more in Sorescu-Marinković and Huțanu 2023: 43-60).

to open the doors of the other world and wake up the dead, who is addressed with a song, in which the key words in Vlach Romanian, are *skuală, pumenjeašće* (“get up, wake up”).

According to Durlić, animatism is evident in a ‘black wedding’ (the burial of a person old enough for marriage with elements of wedding ceremony); the ‘round dance for the dead’ (as a form of returning the deceased to the social life of the community); in the complex rite of *priveg* (the ritual fires for the dead that are lit three, five or seven years 3, 5 or 7 years after the funeral, so that the deceased warm themselves, but also have light in the other world); in falling into a trance in order to communicate with the dead; in the ritual of ‘pouring the water’ for the dead (so that they are not thirsty in the other world); in building timber footbridges over the streams (so the deceased could return home; touching the water, in that sensitive moment, would disintegrate the soul and body, the belief has it); in the construction of fully equipped residential buildings in cemeteries, etc. Finally, Durlić notices that animatism is perhaps best illustrated by the exhumation of the deceased, 40 days after death, as it represents the transition from the symbolic catering to the deceased’s physicality to a drastically concrete act. Namely, the deceased – usually a young person who passed away too soon, for whom there is a great deal of mourning among spouses or parents – is dug up in order to be washed, bathed, have their hair combed and, if necessary, have their clothing changed (Durlić 1995: 237).

Durlić even included the entry *prădăzgropat* (approx. “re-unearthing”) in his recently published *Vlach-Serbian Dictionary of the Traditional Culture of the Vlachs of Eastern Serbia*, with the following explanation:

Re-unearthing is an ancient custom that was practiced by all the Vlachs, but has been lost almost everywhere; it lasted the longest in Homolje. Because it is believed that people live in the other world forever if the sun warms them twice – once during their lifetime, the second time after death – the deceased is exhumed after forty days, early in the morning, before sunrise. Then the coffin is drawn to the edge of the grave and, when the sun rays fall on it, the lid is removed, and the coffin is held up so as to mimic the deceased getting up on their feet. It is kept facing the sun until the sun shines all over them (Durlić 2023, translation ours).

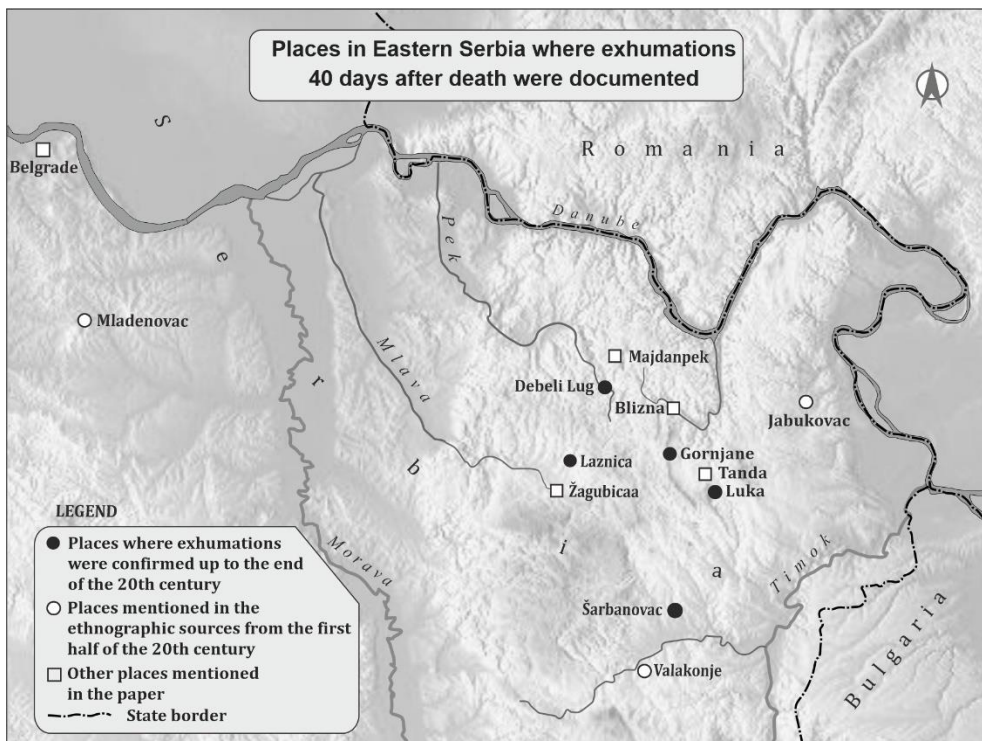
TESTIMONIES ABOUT EXHUMATION: RECENT RESEARCH

Given the shortage of information on the nature and spread of this practice, which is to our knowledge not documented elsewhere in the Balkans,⁴ as well as the emptying of the villages of the region due to labor migration abroad, industrialization, and urbanization, in 2022 we decided to conduct systematic research in the Vlach villages of the Homolje region, hoping that we would still come across people who had heard about the ritual. To our surprise and satisfaction, we managed to talk to people who have also organized and taken part in the ritual.

⁴ In Romanian provinces in the 19th century, for example, exhumation was regularly practiced at three, five, or seven years after the funeral, depending on the age of the deceased, but this primarily had a practical reason. Exhumation at an earlier date after the funeral was exclusively done in cases where the transformation of the dead into a vampire was suspected (Marian 1892: 414-420).

As a result, on the basis of our 2022 research, and more than 15 hours of audio and video recordings of narratives, we now have a much clearer picture of the ritual exhumation 40 days after death. As it has been mentioned, the ritual is no longer practiced, but it persisted until the last decades of the 20th century. Even though it probably had a wider spread, as the older ethnographic sources confirm, the last documented exhumations are confined to several villages of the Homolje and adjacent regions: Debeli Lug, Gornjane, Laznica, Luka, Šarbanovac (see Map).

Homolje is a small geographical region in Eastern Serbia south of the Danube River, centered around the town of Žagubica. In the narrow sense, the term Homolje refers only to the Homolje valley around the Mlava River, but here, we use it in a wider sense, as the mountainous region in Eastern Serbia which presents an extension of the Carpathian Mountains across the Danube, connecting them with the Balkan Mountains in the southeast. The region is one of the most sparsely populated areas of the Balkans and renowned for its unspoiled nature and rich folklore. It has poor infrastructure and long distances between towns, and is subject to further depopulation. The population is Serbian and Vlach.



Even if the motive for the exhumation after 40 days mentioned so far was the profound sorrow (VRom. *de milă*) of the parents or close relatives for somebody who died very young, the discussions with our interlocutors revealed two other motives: the fear of spells (VRom. *de făcături*) and dreams of the deceased (VRom. *cînd visădz*).

Regarding the fear of spells or curses, according to our interlocutors, great attention was paid to the wake for the dead, as somebody might have cut a piece of clothing or a strand of hair from a young boy or girl, who are alive, and hidden it in the coffin. It was believed that the young people whose destiny was ‘buried’ like this in the coffin would not have any wish to continue life and get married. If the family noticed a lack of energy and desire, after a certain period of time (it did not necessarily have to be precisely 40 days), they would open the grave and the coffin and look for the piece of clothing or hair which belonged to the young one, so that they could ‘bring them back to life’ by taking it out of the coffin.

The second reason for which a grave would be opened 40 days after the funeral was when the deceased showed up in somebody’s dream and asked for a particular object or piece of clothing to be ‘sent’ to them to the other world – not what was initially put in the coffin. The deceased could come in a dream to one of the family members or to somebody in the neighborhood, in one or in several similar dreams. If they dreamed of the request at a later date, it was also possible to open the grave after 40 days. Below is the transcript⁵ of a conversation with a 70-year-old man from the village of Tanda in Eastern Serbia:

Dac-a murit, la noi a fost obișeu cînd moare îi puñe tot de drum se-î trăbă, și bitu-î puñe pîngă iel, a trasta îi puñe pe mîna. Trasta noastră ie *rekvizit* care ie măi tare din toace. Cășula și trasta. Și în trastă a m’ers p’epet, oglindă, cîrpă, sapun, să aibă pi lumea aia. Și dacă i-ă zăuitat la vrunu îi dă-n gînd, iel atunsa-l prodezgroapă, moară să pună alfa toace. Și dacă pină a fost viu al muort a cătat să-î pună stragana-n cap, să-î pună niscaî s-a afes iel. Cînd oi muri, ece, asta vă las cu blăstăm, dacă nu-m puñeț asta cu miñe-n l’agăn voi să nu măi av’eț nimica în urma m’a, la *imanje*, la moșiie, la nimic. Ș-acuma ieî nu găsăsc baș atunsa, cată aia se a dzis iel, și de zor nu găsăsc și cînd găsăsc p’e urmă îl îngroapă cu se o fi, că moară să-l îngroape. Cu altă căsulă, l-a îngropat cu alce opinș, ș-atunsa cînd l-a găsît ieî să duc și-l dezgroapă să-i pună aia se a poșit iel cînd a fost viu.

When someone died, for us it was customary to pack everything he would need for the trip; a stick was laid next to him, and a bag, in his hand. Our bag is the most important of all. The cap and the bag. You put a hair comb, mirror, towel, and soap inside the bag, to have in the other world. If somebody forgot it, they remembered and dug up the grave: they must place everything inside. And if, when he was alive, the dead man wanted to have a fur cap on his head, they had to. “I put a curse on you that if you don’t place it in my coffin, you will lose everything, all the estate, property, everything.” And if they didn’t find it on the spot, they buried him with whatever they found, because they had to bury him. With another hat, with different shoes. When they finally found it, they dug him up to place what he wanted when he was alive in the coffin.

The aforementioned interlocutor from Tanda mainly talks about what he had heard about from his father or other people in the village, but the two women from the village of Laznica have first-hand experience with the tradition. They are the sister (S) and wife (W) of a man who died young, at 19 years of age. In 1979, the

⁵ The recordings were made in Vlach Romanian. The transcripts of interviews are given in a partial phonetic transcription, without marking the stressed syllables, for easier reading. The inserted Serbian words are marked in italics. The researchers’ questions are in parentheses, while additional clarifications are in square brackets.

man was exhumed by the family 40 days after the funeral. In 2022, when the recording was made, the women were 66 and 62 years old, respectively. They take turns and complement each other's story, as both were eyewitnesses to the ritual. One can notice the convergence of the two motives which are reasons for exhumation: the appearance of the deceased in a dream, asking to be sent something which he did not have on the other world (here, the hat), and a 'bad' death at a very young age:

S: Pă da, îl dăzgropi și îl dăznăroi, și-l scoț, îl scoț în maržina grupii ș-acuma zavișășce. W: *Isto ponovo* cum fu, cum a fost când l-a îngropat, *isto* tot cam așa. S: Și îl șt'erz cîta, că iel a muședzît, țoal'i'i pră iel a muședzît. A fost cîta amușe pântălonii. W: Ma biîne, a fost numa cîta, nu ie mult, numa păru cînd am dat, așa pică păru. S: Nu dînaince, n-a picat păru dînaince, ma dînapoi *ama...* A m'ers sînze dîn nas pră gură, a m'ers și s-a stuors aiș la căpătîn. Și iel aiș a picat păru, da dînaince nu. Numa aișa, cum a fuost, cum s-a-ntuors a m'ers sînze dă pră nas. Îl țin cîta și dai de pomană, că șică aila șe-l scoț mai o dată, aila afe două v'ecuri, șică mai o dată mai ieșe, să fii pră pomînt, șcii. (Aha, pîntru aia s-a scos.) S: Da. Pa așa a vrut maica. E, sāraca, ar fi făcut ia, care șcii. Și nu i-am pus pālăriie. Nu i-am pus pālăriie-n cap... că *omladina* n-a vrut atuns să-i puñem pālăriie... Da visadză Petra lu Prîscă, ș-a fost după Stănică lu Prîscă, visadză că să-ntîlneșce cu iel pă Cămeñița. Și cu tranzistoru la ureche. Că iel a avut tranzistoru ași, l-a ținut ași la pinzere la ștală. Pînă pașce vașil'i, ăla cîntă. Și iel tot ași a fost multă vrame, pînă-ncoase. Și dzîșe: Da un ce duș tu? Da mă duc la vafe. Da tu ce duș în sat? Dzîșe: Mă duc în sat. Da-a, să-ı spuñ la muma, la muñer'i'i m'e'le, să-m' d'a pālăriie că baș nu mă pot cu capu gol. Iel mult a m'ers tot cu pālăriie, șcii, iel n-a mă m'ers cu capu gol, să-m' d'a pālăriie. Și numa P'etra ñe spuñe și îi dăm pālăriia aia. S-antăritat mă mult că să-l scoćem, că ala mă scump v'ec pră pomînt cînd îl mă scoace o dată pră asta *sv'et...* Șcii, că l-a îngropat cînăr și îl mă scoț o dată, afe două v'ecuri.

S: Well, you dig him up, clean the mud off of him, put him on the edge of the pit, it depends. W: Again, the same as it was when you buried him the first time. S: You wipe him a bit, because he rotted, his clothes rotted. The trousers were a bit rotted. W: Well, only a bit, not a lot. Only when I touched his hair did it fall off. S: Not in front; his front hair did not fall off, but on the back side. Blood came out of his nose and mouth, came out and leaked onto the pillow. And he lost his hair here, not in front. Only here, when we turned him, did blood come out of his nose. You hold him a bit and make offerings, because they say that the one who gets out of the grave has two lives. Supposedly he comes back to Earth, you know. (I see, that's why they took him out.) S: Yes. Mom wanted it. Poor Mom; she would have done anything. But we didn't put a hat on his head. Because young people didn't like hats back then. And Petra of Prîscă, Stănică of Prîscă's wife, dreamt that she met him in Kamenica. He had his radio to his ear. Because he had a radio which he kept at the barn window. While the livestock was grazing, the radio was singing. He spent a lot of time there. And he asks: Where are you going? Down to the valley. What about you, are you going to the village? He says: I'm going to the village. But tell Mom, tell my women to give me a hat because I can't stand it with nothing on my head any longer. He used to wear a hat, you know. Let them give me a hat. Petra told us to give him the hat. Then Mom was even more eager to dig him out, because that is the most precious life on Earth when you get him out once more in this life. Because he was buried young and if you dig him up, he has two lives.

The neighbor dreaming about the deceased complaining that he had no hat in the other world and he could not stand it any longer was just an added reason for the dejected mother to open the grave and see her son once more. The testimony of the two women, close relatives of the deceased, is a combination of physical observations – the rotten trousers, the blood coming out of the nose, the loss of hair – and the belief that if the deceased is taken out of the grave once more, he would have two lives: “That is the most precious life on Earth when you get him out once more in this life. Because he was buried young and if you dig him up, he has two lives.”

Other interlocutors mention that the sun should shine on the person who is dug out. Below is the fragment of a conversation with another interlocutor from the village of Tanda who was 78 years old in 2022. This person recalls a discussion with a roommate from the village of Luka, who took part in such an exhumation sometime in the 1970s. The person who died young was dug out by his parents, as a consolation and for “the sun to see him once more”:

Da, da, la Luk'a fac aia. Baș cînd am fost *srednja škola*, sã dzišem, țimeru, așã n-am vorbit. İo am ascultat pînã țel povestește la unu, nu șcu cu care-a vorbit, *da li je neki njegov... Neki rođak. Ne znam šta mu je bio. Mislim da je taj bio Vlada Pisariu što je bio u Luku. I taj je umro mlad i onda su ga, na četres dana njegovı su ga otkopali i da li je on bio prisutan, ali nije... Kaže kad je naișao onaj smrad, povraćalo mu se. Ili je neko njemu prićao tako, u tom smıslu. Znaći autentićno je, da je to bilo tako. Da su ga otkopali, gledali ga i pustili nazad. (Da li se prića zašto se to radilo?) Sã spuňe sã-l mai vadã o datã soar'i, nu șcu. Ali bilo je toga. Zapamtio sam to, pošto je malo ekstremno. Kod nas u selu nije bilo, nije se to radilo, ali tamo, da. Taj mlad je umro ćovek i onda tako. Ne otkopava svako. Samo onaj koji... Na primer, roditelji ćijje dete, verovatno hoće još jednom da ga vide, pa to kao uteha, verovatno. Znaći to roditelji rade, drugi ne.*

Yes, yes, they do it in Luka. When I went to high school, I talked to my roommate. I listened to him talking to somebody; I don't know whether it was his relative or somebody else. I think it was [a person called] Vlada Pisariu, from Luka. He died young and then, after 40 days, his [parents] disinterred him and I don't know exactly whether he [the roommate] was present or not. He said when the stink came, he felt like vomiting. Or somebody told him that. I mean, it was real. That they disinterred him, took a look at him, and put him back. (Did they say why it's done like that?) They say so the sun sees him once more; I don't know. But it happened. I remembered it because it's a bit extreme. In our village [Tanda] it was not, people did not do it, but over there, yes. That guy died young and stuff. Not everybody is disinterred. For example, the parents whose child died probably want to see them once more, so it's sort of a consolation, probably. Meaning the parents do it, others – no.

Nevertheless, the first interlocutor in Tanda, the 70-year-old man, mentions that sometimes, the day set for opening the grave is cloudy. Nevertheless, he explains that this is not a condition for the ritual to succeed: it is enough that the “white ray, the ray of the day” (VRom. *radza albã alu dziuã*) touches the dead. He also mentions that the dead's face is washed with white wine by some people, and with water and basil by others:

N-a făcut toată lumea. A ڏڙgropat p'-aĩ cínerf cĩnd a murit bãiat, f'ece marĩ, parinĩĩ care n-a mãĩ putut. A ŝciut ieĩ cã nu ie bun sã-ĩ ڏezgroape, ama ڏe dor, ڏe milã ĩ-a ڏezgropat. Da aŝc-aĩ cínerf ĩĩ ڏezgroapã pinã nu rã sare soarl'ĩ. Sã-ĩ mãĩ vadã o datã soarl'ĩ. (Aŝa sã zĩce.) Da. (Ŝĩ cine merge sã-i ڏezgroape?) Pã m'erze aĩ luĩ, samo fãmeliĩa ŝĩ dacã baŝ vrunu atĩta care, ڏĩn comŝĩĩ, da furiŝ s-a ڏezgropat. Nu s-a dus aĩa sã ŝciĩe toatã lumea cã sã ڏezgroapã, numa sã vorb'esc. Femeliĩa, na primer, ĩn casã, aĩde, uĩte mãĩ vrea ŝĩ ujna, aĩde atunŝa sã meargã ŝĩ ujna, ŝĩ aĩa sã duc sã ڏezgroape. (La 40 de zĩle). Pã pin la patru dzãŝ ڏe dzĩle, kao. ĩl scot cu l'agãn cu tot ŝĩ ĩl pun p'e mormĩnt, ĩarã p'e sapaturã, cã ĩĩ sapã, ĩl prosapã, ŝĩ-l pun p'e sãpãturã ŝĩ ڏeschid l'agãnu ŝĩ-l spalã. Unĩĩ spun cã cu vin ڏ-al alb l-a spalãt, unĩĩ cu vin, unĩĩ cu apã ŝĩ cu busuĩoc, acuma ŝiĩa ĩo nu ŝcu sã ce mint baŝ cu ŝe sã spalã, ama cu al'a, unĩĩ aŝa, unĩĩ aŝa. L-a spalãt p'e ochi ŝĩ-l lasã. Dacã nu ĩl v'ede, cĩnd e novuĩalã, dacã nu-l v'ede radza al soarelui, ĩl v'ede radza alu dzĩuã. I sã dzĩse ŝĩ radza albã alu dzĩuã cĩnd sã faŝe. Da ĩl v'ede radza albã la dzĩ. Dacã are ĩel sreće ڏe cĩnd ie ãla ŝĩ rã sare soarl'e, ĩl luminã soarl'e-n ĩel ŝĩ ĩl ĩĩn cĩta. Unĩĩ spun cã sã porĩeŝce sã sã strĩse, unĩĩ spun cã samo ŝe nu vorb'eŝce, care cum.

Not everybody did it. They disinterred young people when they died. Boys or girls, the parents who could not take it any longer. They knew it was not okay to do it, but they did it out of love, out of sorrow. The young ones are disinterred before the sun rises. So that the sun sees them once more. (That's what they say.) Yes. (Who goes to disinter them?) Their, only the family or if somebody really wants to, the neighbors. But it's done in secret. Not everybody knows that there's going to be a disinterring; they just agree to it. For example, the family in the house, look, the aunt also wants to, then let her come too, and they go to the grave. (After 40 days.) Well, up to 40 days. They get them out of the coffin and put it on the ground, because they dig them out, re-dig them, they put it on the ground, open the coffin and wash them. Some say they wash them with white wine, others with wine, others with water and basil. Well, I can't tell you exactly what they wash them with, some say like this, others like that. They wash their face and let them be. If it's cloudy, if the sun ray does not see them, the rays of the day will do. They call it the white ray of the day, when it dawns. If they are lucky and the sun rises, the sun shines on them and they keep them a bit. Some say they start to decay, others say they look like they could start speaking any moment; it depends.

While most of the people we talked to mention the secret or half-secret nature of the ritual, in the village of Laznica, it was apparently common practice to apply for a permission for exhumation 40 days after the funeral, from the village council, which was easily obtained, as our interlocutors described.

In the village of Blizna, on the other hand, we recorded a 90-year-old woman whose two-year-old child died in the 1950s. Devastated with sorrow, she recalls that she wanted to open up the grave so she could see her child once more, but her father-in-law did not agree to it, as he believed the pain would be even greater:

A fost aĩa. A fost, numa ڏe la o vřam'e n-a mãĩ fost. A perit unu cu motuoru ĩn Maĩdan pi criviĩĩl'e-ãl'a al'e Maĩdanului. Ŝĩ ĩĩ l-a ڏezgropat furiŝ, ali s-a osecit tot mormĩnũu. Ŝĩ ڏĩ la o vřam'e, nu. Da ĩo am tras sã-m ڏezgroape gloćĩta m'a s-o vãd ŝĩ socru-m'o nu m'-a dat. ĩa micã, crudã, tu numa s-o v'edz, ŝicã, ŝĩ ma'

Yes, it used to be. But at some point, it stopped. Somebody died in a motorcycle crash on those curves in Majdanpek. And they disinterred him in secret, but the entire graveyard was stinking. And after a while it stopped. I also insisted on disinterring my baby to see her, but my father-in-law did not allow it. She's small, young, if you

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| <p><i>gore-ț</i> făś, da, śică, și nu cućedz. Și duće vřam’e, vińe vřam’e, aĩa s-a śćers aĩa, s-a luvat, nu.</p> | <p>see her, you will feel even worse, and you shouldn’t do it. So, time came and went by, it got lost, it got erased.</p> |
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Mention must be made, however, of the fact that Vlachs from other regions of Eastern Serbia were startled and appalled when they were asked about this ritual. They said it was a sin to disinter the dead and that they had never heard of something like that, which goes to show that the area where the ritual was practiced is, at least today, very small and, the odd exceptions notwithstanding, it typically had a secret nature, with knowledge about the exhumation confined to the close members of the family.

CONCLUSIONS

As the older ethnographic data from the first half of the 20th century suggest, exhuming the body 40 days after death if a person died young used to be a widespread custom among the Vlachs of Eastern Serbia. However, at the end of the 20th century, its spread was already reduced to only a few villages of the Homolje region, and today, this segment of traditional culture can only be reconstructed from the testimonies of eyewitnesses.

It is difficult to say much about the origin of this phenomenon as, to our knowledge, there are no equivalent customs in the Balkans. We should however not exclude the fact that it could have been practiced more widely, either in the territories north of the Danube, where the Vlachs came from, or south of the Danube, where they settled. Nevertheless, given its taboo nature and the fact that it was practiced in the close family circle, it might have gone unnoticed and therefore remained unreported by ethnographers.

Exhumation of the people suspected to have turned into vampires, the most common type of exhumation in this part of Europe, stemmed from a profound, ancestral fear of death, and was done as an apotropaic and protective measure. Vampires allegedly threatened the animals and the entire community, who then together with the priests took part in the exhumation, which was a public act. Exhumation after 40 days, as it was practiced by the Vlachs of Eastern Serbia, on the other hand, stemmed from a similarly profound emotion, but on a different level: a deep sorrow and love for people who departed too early and too young. It comes as no surprise that not much has been written about the custom, as only the family members took part in this ritual, and in the past, the graves in numerous Vlach villages used to be individual graves on the property next to one’s house, not in a community cemetery. Today, it only survives in the memory of the last people who witnessed it.

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