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### THE GYPSIES' BELIEFS – IDEAS OF DEATH, MOURNING AND THE CULT OF DEATH<sup>1</sup>

The gypsy population of almost 800.000 people in Hungary is considerably varied and strongly divided both horizontally and vertically; it is composed of groups of different languages, origin, history, genetics, tradition and culture. Their culture is ethnic, although it often includes elements of the culture of poverty, customs taken from Hungarian peasant culture are also clearly noticeable in their tradition. The latter one is particularly true to their behaviour around dead people; the acceptance of death, the tasks to be performed, the vigil, the orders of mourning are preserved in the world of gypsies as unwritten rules, while modernisation has almost completely made them forgotten in the majority of society.

#### IDEAS OF DEATH

The gypsies' idea of death is intimately linked to their faith in the transcendent world and the immortality of the soul. Although, as Michael Stewart wrote it – an English anthropologist who had lived among a Hungarian gypsy community he called 'Harangos' with his family for a longer period of time – based on his own experience: 'Their conscience lacks the idea that life is a marching towards death, even though death is often used as a threat in various language forms. This serves as a testimony to their fear of death and not to the preparedness for death.'<sup>2</sup> Indeed, it is often used for emphasis among Vlach Gypsies: '*Te merav!*' May I die! (if I am lying about it), '*May my mother be consumed by the black mourning!*' (if I am telling a lie).

In traditional groups, death is always an unexpected and brutal event effecting the whole community. The transition process between biological and social death is easily traceable in their cult of death; as opposed to Western cultures, death is not a unique event but a process, during which the deceased person gradually passes from this world to the land of the dead. The first stage of death starts with the moment of death when circulation stops, vitality ends, and the *dyi* (soul) leaves the body. The soul starts wandering in this world (visits the stages of its life on earth, watches whether its vigil is held properly, etc.) that lasts until the moment of the funeral. The second stage of death starts then, during which the soul returns to the body to be put down in the grave. It remains there for six weeks, but it still has the possibility to 'travel home'. The last stage starts thereafter, when the soul leaves the body and starts its afterlife. The process of death is finished by the first anniversary. By that time the soul finds its place and 'fits in' the order of afterlife. The tasks related to death and the strict rules of mourning are closely related to these stages. The main motive for observing these unwritten

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<sup>1</sup> Published: KÉK EMERENCIA-SZATMÁRI GYÖRGYI-TÓTH BEÁTA (ed.): *Kövek az Isten házához* SAPIENTIA Kiadó, Budapest, 2018. 349-355.

<sup>2</sup> STEWART MICHAEL: "A magyarországi romák halotti szokásai," in BERTA PÉTER (ed.): *Halál és kultúra – Tanulmányok a társadalomtudományok köréből* I., Janus–Osiris Kiadó, Budapest, 2001, 293-312.

rules is the fear of the deceased person and of its soul called *mulo*; everything must be done right, nothing shall be forgotten, otherwise the deceased person would return, which brings illness and bad luck.<sup>3</sup>

### **TAKING CARE OF THE DECEASED, TASKS TO BE PERFORMED, HOLDING VIGIL**

Saying goodbye to the deceased and taking care of related tasks – especially in the case of Vlach Gypsies – is required even in hospitalized condition. (Almost ten years ago, farewell rooms were established in a few hospitals to the initiative of Lenkovics Barnabás parliamentary commissioner of civil rights at that time, and Pilling János psychiatrist.) The most sensitive matter is post-mortem autopsy. Traditional gypsies maintain that the body remains whole only without autopsy. They also fear the removal of organs which may cause the hostility of the *mulo*.

Tasks around the deceased are: the washing of the body, dressing it in the best outfit, combing the hair, braiding the hair, shaving men's face, so that 'it will not go in a dirty condition to afterlife'. The closure of the body is also important, to 'seal' it by tying up the chin and by placing coins on the eyes. Tying the two feet together by the ankles is also common (or tying the big toes together, earlier breaking the heels of the shoes or boots). After the completion of these tasks, the vigil begins – as the deceased shall not be left alone during the last stay on earth – at the relatives' house, from sunset to sunrise every day until the day of the funeral. The course of the vigil – attended by all relatives to pay respect – varies per group and community: whether songs are to be sung (either church or profane songs), stories be told or not, or the question of whether to touch the deceased or not. Nomad gypsies of Szőkefalva consider that those who are afraid shall touch it, but pregnant women shall certainly do, otherwise she would give birth to a dead child.

The corpse is not considered a real gypsy. Okley experienced the same with gypsies in England: 'dead gypsy becomes similar to gadjes'<sup>4</sup> and Piasere wrote the following about Slovenian gypsies in Italy: 'first, the dead becomes similar to gadjes, then integrates to dead gypsies'.<sup>5</sup>

The vigil lasting for days is a perfect way for mourning. The favourite songs of the deceased are sung, typical figures of speech are used, his/her life events are revisited, and everyone can add their own experiences and memories. József Choli Daróczi – the senior of gypsies – stated that vigil is the take-back of the 'strength of the deceased'; by singing his songs and talking about him, his 'cultural assets' are taken back by the community, as he can be at peace only if nothing holds him here.<sup>6</sup>

### **FEASTS AND MOURNING**

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<sup>3</sup>MAGDA SZAPU: "Halotti szokások és hiedelmek a kaposszentjakabi oláh cigányoknál," in ILDIKÓ KRIZA (ed.): *Ciganisztikai tanulmányok*, MTA Néprajzi kutatócsoport, Budapest, 1984, 34-39.

<sup>4</sup>JUDITH OKLEY: "Szellemeik és gorgiok," in PÉTER BERTA (ed): op. cit., 209-226.

<sup>5</sup>LEONARDO PIASERE: "A cigányok Olaszországban," in: CSABA PRÓNAI (ed.): *Cigányok Európában 1*. Budapest, Új Mandátum Kiadó, 1985, 325.

<sup>6</sup>JÓZSEF CHOLI-DARÓCZI: "Szokásaink" (3rd May, 2007. Budapest), [online] <http://www.uccualapitvany.hu/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Choli-Daróczi-József-cigány-szokásvilág.pdf> (21. 05. 2018.)

The mourning family is bound by strict rules; it is forbidden to sleep during night, to make love, to wash, to cook, to comb their hair, to shave for men. Tasks after the funeral are also defined by the different stages of death, and changes are remembered by feasts. The first feast – immediately after the funeral – is held at the house of the deceased where everyone is invited. The next one takes place six weeks later (when the soul leaves the body) with close family members around the grave. They take food and drinks to the grave, pour the drink abundantly on it, and also leave cigarettes. Grieving people must wear black, abstain from drinking alcohol, playing music and having a nice time for six weeks. The third feast after one year is also held at the cemetery, a merrier occasion for breaking the mourning (taking off mourning clothes worn by women until the first anniversary). According to their faith, there is happiness in the afterlife as well, as the soul of the deceased has found its place.

In case something was done wrong during the course of the vigil, the funeral or the mourning, then the soul of the deceased would come back and disturb the living. For the sake of full reconciliation, the deceased is usually ‘entertained’ for a while after the funeral; his favourite meal is put on the table, salt and water are left there until the next day. Gypsies in Szimő set his favourite meal in the yard, and if it disappears by the morning, then they are reassured that ‘he came home nicely, and is not angry’. There are several forms of defence against disturbing ghosts; hanging icons on the door, rubbing garlic on the door frames, drawing crosses, sprinkling holy water on the house, celebrate a mass for the peace of the soul.<sup>7</sup>

#### **CULT OF DEATH IN THE 21ST CENTURY**

Preparing the grave or the ‘clean room’ is also part of the burial rituals for gypsies in Hungary. It is arranged and designed according to the financial condition of the family. The inside of the burial chamber is usually made of concrete, tiled, with carpets on the floor for poor families as well. Wealthier families also place clothes, shoes, beverage shelf with drinks, table, plasma TV and other furnishings in the chamber. They often put a large stack of money in the hand and the pocket of the deceased in order to provide all the necessities for afterlife. After the coffin is put down, they place cross boards above it so that ‘the soil will not put pressure on the chest of the deceased’.

According to Péter Szuhay, the furnishing of burial chambers – the ‘eternal domicile’<sup>8</sup> – might be a new custom among gypsies, as it is not mentioned in old ethnographic observations (unlike loud and visible expressions of pain, feasts and prohibitions during mourning). He believes that gypsies ethnicize their funerals deliberately and vigorously with the aim of strengthening their identity and highlighting their differences from *gadjes*; ‘we do not just put our deceased ones in the ground’.

Another new custom related to the cult of death: a lockable glass ‘house’ built around the tombstone with small chairs and a table inside by the tombstone, drinks and cigarette on the table, a small broom and a dustpan hidden behind the chair. Even years after the funeral they bring food, drink and cigarettes for their deceased relatives. They take a rest in the ‘house’,

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<sup>7</sup> MICHAEL STEWART: “A magyarországi romák halotti szokásai,” in PÉTER BERTA (ed.): op. cit., 293-312.

<sup>8</sup> PÉTER SZUHAY – EDIT KŐSZEGI: “Megadjuk a tiszteletet,” *Beszélő* 4 (2002) 84-96.

then sweep the floor, tidy up, close the house, and proceed similarly on their next visit. Traces of feasts – drinks, cigarettes on tombstones, chocolate or coke on children’s tombstones – can be found on open graves as well. (In the last few years I have found and took pictures myself of such ‘open’ graves or graves with ‘houses’ in Gödöllő, Máriabesnyő and Budapest).

Customs related to death and mourning are changing today<sup>9</sup> some of them ‘become modernized’ – vigils often do not last until sunrise, but everyone goes home late night and then gathers the next evening (as they need to rest, children have to go to school, adults have errands to run) – other customs such as viewings disappeared (due to medicalization). In place of the old customs – as a compensation for lost traditions – new customs of funeral and mourning have been adopted since the second half of the 20th century (especially Vlach and Hungarian Romungro Gypsies). New elements include the establishment of the above mentioned ‘eternal domiciles’; the erection of crypts and ‘mausoleums’, huge and spectacular burial chambers (with Corinthian pillars, horse statues, etc.); and the placement of personal belongings, beverages, jewellery and clothes in addition to money.

Educated, younger gypsies and those who are geographically torn from their relatives preserve fewer of their ancestors’ customs in this area as well.

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<sup>9</sup>ZOLTÁN VINCZE – JÁNOS PILLING: “A cigánység jelenkori halotti és gyászszokásai: egy mélyinterjú kutatás tapasztalatai,” *Kharon Thanatológiai Szemle* 19 (2015/1-2) 1-24.