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# ABOUT THE CUSTOM OF REPEATED (DOUBLE) BURIAL

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Branko Đaković

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## IZVLEČEK

### **O šegi ponovnega (dvojnega) pokopa**

Za današnje vsakdanje življenje sta značilna obstoj in praksa novih obredov, zlasti kadar se ti nanašajo na spremembe v družbenem in političnem življenju. Prekopavanje in prevoz posmrtnih ostankov pomembnih in kulturnih oseb v povezavi z dvojnimi pokopom v kraju rojstva pomenita praznaprav prenašanje starih kulturnih vzorcev, prilagojenih novim kulturnim (in ne le kulturnim) kontekstom. V ciklusu posmrtnih in pogrebnih šeg, pri ponovljenem oziroma "dvojnem" pokopu, je imel izkop poseben pomen, tako kot tudi "srečanje" in "videnje" umrlega. Natančno ime šege s tako kompleksno strukturo in vsebino ni jasno. Medkulturni podatki potrjujejo razširjenost obredov, povezanih s to šego, in potrjujejo njen univerzalni antropološki kontekst.

Podatki za območje južnih Slovanov potrjujejo, da je bila na tem območju šega dvojnega pokopa znana že v prvi polovici devetega stoletja. Motiv za nastanek tega članka pa je bilo neobjavljeno gradivo Etnološkega atlasa Jugoslavije, ki so ga zbirali na Centru za etnološko kartografijo Oddelka za etnologijo Filozofske fakultete v Zagrebu. Iz zbranega gradiva lahko sklepamo, da je do dvojnih pokopov (s spremljajočimi obredi) prihajalo v časovnem razponu od 40 dni do 30 in več let. Razlogi in motivi za prekopavanje so bolj ali manj jasni. Pogosto je bil vzrok le pomanjkanje prostora, vedno pa je prekope spremljalo spoštovanje do ostankov umrlega. Po avtorjevem mnenju je ključ za razumevanje tega problema mogoče najti v raziskavah in zanesljivih interpretacijah obredov, ki so del procesa prekopavanja. Glede na to avtor omenja dve tradiciji:

1. izkop grobov, da bi preučili stanje trupla, povezan z verovanji o volkodlakih in vampirjih;
2. različni načini izražanja spoštovanja.

**Ključne besede:** šege, obredi, pogrebi, dvojni pokopi, vprašalniki

**Key words:** customs, rituals, funerals, double (repeated) burials, questionnaires

Double burial is one of syntagm which is used in ethnological standard and scientific literature to denote and include a custom of digging up posthumous remains after a definite time (after 40 days or after 10 or more years) and burying them again which is followed by different rituals. The notes from the literature used in this paper were a line of direction for the elaboration of the material from the ethnological Questionnaire, which was gathered for the ethnological Atlas of Yugoslavia in the sixties and seventies of this century.

The past war hardships and distractions unfortunately marked out the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century on the south Slavic territory. Unbelievable destruction did not pass by many sacred objects, even graves. There were much devastation of tombstones and other ways of desecration of graves. All this was motivated with irrational wish to exterminate the cultural, national and religious identity of the “enemy”. This showed a complete negation of universal human values and man as the only being that buries his dead and pays them respect. In the meantime exhumation and transport of the posthumous remains (or relic) of persons of dignity and Saints from the near or past times was going on and become a sort of political and religious ritual. Scaffolds, charnel-houses and grave-yards were visited. Requiems and funeral services were held. Mass hysteria led to the celebration of god Tanatos. In the final act of this tragedy the defeated (as if all aren’t defeated and losers), of both at war sides began to exhume old as well as new graves so that the posthumous remains of their deceased could be taken away from “ethnic-clean” territory.

This so called human transport showed its other side too, the inhuman.

All these events and relations towards contemporaries, ancestors and entire heritage showed in a tragic way that this is in fact a transmission of old cultural patterns into a new social and cultural context.

In the cycle of posthumous customs the ethnologists during their research come to interesting cognitions. Some of this cannot be entirely explained and some questions ask for other answers, but in fact it is not possible to deny the positive attitude towards dead, which is sometimes explained as fear. Death, durable in time and decades in “folk culture” confirm that positive attitude.

In a general division there are at least two traditions which contain more different elements and through these elements we can observe the attitude of the south Slavs towards the place of the burial (grave) and deceased. The grave-yard or grave alone is always considered holy without regard to religious or other differences. One tradition forbids or avoids digging up grave for more than one decade as long as there is any sign that grave existed. If it is a custom, with many different rituals, the other tradition permits digging up the graves in different time intervals, from 40 days to several years. In both traditions, nearly without exception, the respect towards the deceased is shown, except when the exhumation is connected with beliefs that the deceased might become a vampire or werewolf.

The custom of digging up a grave in different time intervals with local characteristics, in ethnological literature known as *repeated* or *double burial*, arouse an interest among several ethnologists in the last hundred years. It was merely briefly described or mentioned in different scientific publications. A detailed research and analysis about this matter made Evel Gasparini and Milko Matičetov in the first half of the fifties and Šefik Bešliagić in the seventies.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Tihomir Đorđević gave an impulse to this research, on the south Slavic territories, in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, although some information was found by J. Csaplovics at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. We can also mention Lilek (and other authors mentioned by Đorđević, Matičetov and Bešliagić) and some foreign authors (Haberlandt, Wliscocki, Vakarelski, Burgstaller etc.) and their comparative data.

Meanwhile the Union of Ethnological Societies of Yugoslavia started a project The Ethnological Atlas of Yugoslavia. The Project (forming the Questionnaire and gathering material in the field) was realised by many associates from all federal units (republics). The material that first arrived in the Centre for Ethnological Cartography at the Department of Ethnology of the Faculty of Philosophy in Zagreb, was archived till the second half of the sixties. The Centre has valuable archive with data for 157 ethnological themes from about 3100 places (villages) covering all the regions of former Yugoslavia.

The material for the theme “Digging out the posthumous remains and repeated burial” (Questionnaire, vol. IV, No. 129), was gathered between seventies and eighties.<sup>2</sup> My intention is to make a short preliminary analysis of data concerning this theme.

There are seven groups of questions, which are to be answered:

- the time when the ritual of digging out the grave took place (after 3, 7 or more years) with the intention to bury a next body or digging out grave for some other reason
- who is involved in the exhumation and what rituals are connected with it
- the treatment with the posthumous remains (putting them in a basket or small coffin, wrapping in linen or scarf)
- the place where the remains are placed, in the same grave or outside the grave.

There is an extra group of questions: - is the grave dug out in order to examine the posthumous remains or with other reason “...to let the sun warm the bones”.

According to data from the Questionnaire the time after which it is permitted to disinter an old grave and to bury a new deceased is very variable.

It is not possible to know after how many years the exhumation is allowed on a wide and familiar region. In most cases it concerns local traditions which correspond with the same ones on a faraway territory.

To disinter a grave after 3 or 5 years is very rare, except if it was the last wish of the dying person who wanted to be buried in a particular grave regardless to the time that passed from last funeral. A custom in which a married couple is buried in the same grave is not equally spread. For example, in northeast Macedonia the husband can be buried in his wife's grave but not the other way, or whether the children (son or daughter) are allowed to be buried in their parent's grave. Disinterring a family vault, mostly in Adriatic region, is permitted even before the determined time has passed. Exhumation after 40 days or 6 months, often in the east and southeast regions, is usually explained by great grief, especially for dead children. In Slovenia exhumation is done after 5 or 10 years, and in west Serbia, east Herzegovina and Monte Negro after 7 years.

In Monte Negro, Serbia and Macedonia the exhumation takes place on religious holiday, usually on holidays after Easter. The holidays are: Christian's day (5<sup>th</sup> January), Lazarus day, Theodore's day, Easter Monday (Pobus(a)ni ponedjeljak) – when peo-

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<sup>2</sup> It is necessary to emphasize an excellent poll by M. Matičetov and the research work of Maister. Gathering the data for this theme, with the Questionnaire of the Ethnological Atlas, faced many difficulties – the mere conception of the questions, which could not include everything, and misunderstanding the meaning of the question by some of the persons which were taking down notes.

ple visit the grave-yard to tidy the graves (pobusaju se),<sup>3</sup> Pentecost day, All Souls' day (1. before Easter; 2. close to Pentecost day; 3. Demetrius day, 9<sup>th</sup> November) and St. Marcus day; (all the holidays and dates are according to the Julian calendar).

Here and there it is permitted to dig over a grave after 20 or more years. In the lowlands and partly in the highlands (northeast Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia), both the Catholics and Orthodox do not permit exhumation at all. It could only happen by accident when nobody knows the old burial place.

Even then the posthumous remains are treated with respect although significant rituals are not omitted. The bones are buried in new dug up grave (or old dug over grave) or they are buried in an other part of the grave-yard and that only if there is no collective vaults. For example, in Glinsko Novo Selo, a village between Petrinja and Glina in Croatia, and in some villages in Pokuplje and east of Zagreb people cease digging up a grave if they come upon "old" bones and the grave is immediately covered, while in Blato on the island of Korčula it is considered bad luck to touch the bones which are dug out.

To show the smallest sign of respect to the posthumous remains, they are put on the ground, paper or linen beside the newly dug up grave where they are covered with some soil till the next burial. In the villages Jablanica by Maglaj in Bosnia and Razbojna by Brusa in Serbia the bones are left for a while out of the grave, so that the sun can shine on them and then they are buried.<sup>4</sup>

According to the data from the Questionnaire it is not possible yet to make definite conclusions about digging over graves and repeated burial as a family tradition (which has been mentioned in literature), but it confirms an important role of the Church. In some places the exhumation and repeated burial had to be done by neighbours (it was in fact their obligation); older men from the family, godfathers or the godmother or even the grown up children.

In Macedonia women could participate in the ritual when the bones have been washed (with water or wine) but their status in the community is not stated.

In Mrakovo by Sarajevo, men who didn't have children or won't have children any more were those who dug up the grave; in Zapolje by Otočac in Lika the sons-in-law are those who dig out their mother-in-laws grave. But, regardless the time when an old grave is dug over the bones are carefully wrapped in linen (best in white and home wo-

<sup>3</sup> The "pobusan" Monday (pobus(a)ni ponedjeljak) is mentioned in the Orthodox community as a day when people visit the grave-yard to tidy the graves ("pobusavaju, busaju se"), (busen, bus = turf of grass and soil); in other parts (in Monte Negro) people put on the graves, beside other gifts, black painted Eastereggs.

<sup>4</sup> Beside data from the Questionnaire there are other informations. While digging up a mediaeval cemetery in Brestovik (Serbia) the women from the village approved the action only because, "...the sun will warm the bones once more". Even the Muslims from the area near Bihać in northwest Bosnia "opened" the grave, "...so that the sun warms their dear deceased once more" (Š. Bešlagić, 1974, 207). According to this Bešlagić tried to link, (maybe it's too exaggerated!), the double burial with prechristian worship of the Sun. If such evidence exists; examples from a research done in Čečavac, Slobošтина and Smoljanovci in the west part of Požega basin in Slavonia by Orthodox in the eighties; or the information by Ivan Klarić, that the Catholics in Kralje near Bihać, "...before they buried (the deceased) they opened the coffin so that the sun can shine on him and the relatives can kiss him", (I. Klarić, Kralje in Bosnia: Rodenje, svadba i smrt, Zbornik za narodni život i običaje južnih Slavena, 27, 1930, 165 – 175); they are insufficient for the thesis by Bešlagić.

ven), put in small trunk (*kovčežić, zabojček*), or a linen bag. In some places, mostly in Croatia, Bosnia and Serbia, a white sheet is used (*lancun, čaršaf*).

Often the bones are put in scarf (*rubac, facolić, šamija*), usually a white one, but in some places in Serbia and Macedonia they put them in black one. Sometimes they are put in white rag or towel (*peškir, ubrus*), in Serbia and Macedonia the male bones are put in a cap.<sup>5</sup>

Reduction of the ritual, on a vast territory, confirms that the custom is gradually disappearing. In Slovenia there is very little data about cleaning and washing the bones with water (the custom is otherwise confirmed), than in Monte Negro, Serbia and Macedonia. The usage of wine in the ritual remains only in the east and southeast parts but there are no data about washing the bones with it. It is often mentioned that the Orthodox perform sprinkling and blessing with holy water, which is brought from the Church and while burning the incense it is done by a priest. For sanctification a mixture of wine and oil was used in west Bosnia, east Herzegovina, Serbia and Macedonia.

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From Slovenia (Dovje by Mojstrana) to Macedonia there are noted cases where the posthumous remains are taken to church and put on the altar usually for one night; in the surroundings of Ohrid even 40 days.

A special procedure with the skull (well known from the research of M. Matičetov and Maister) accordingly to the Questionnaire is confirmed only in a few places in Slovenia: Srednji Vrh – Gozd, Nomenj and Stara Fužina – Bohinj, Olševik and Tupališče – Kranj, Rateče and Spodnje Jezerko – Preddvor. Outside Slovenia it is mentioned in Đevrske by Obrovac in Bukovica (Croatia) where the Orthodox Serbs live and in Brajići by Budva (Monte Negro), where the skull of the deceased son was put in his mother's coffin. Washing the skull was practised in Matiševo by Kolašin (Monte Negro) but without a detailed description. In the villages near Livno, mostly the Catholics and some Orthodox separated the skull and covered it with a sheet, and in Miši the skull was buried separated from the skeleton and put beside the skull of the last deceased.

The conduct with the dug out posthumous remains at the repeated burial show great differences according to the place in the old grave where they are put. It is difficult to make a relevant systematisation, not only because of the wide range of the territory but because of the need for thorough analysis and complete understanding and interpretation of the rituals. The posthumous remains are put beside the new coffin, generally, or below the coffin (the coffin is put directly on the remains or the remains are put in small hole; in the corner of the grave or in a small opening; on the coffin (in the centre, to the head or down to the feet); in the grave beside the coffin – up to the loins (in southwest Bosnia), up to the head or feet, in general and with some special characteristics. In Zagoni by Bjeljina (northeast Bosnia) the female bones are put at the left and the male at the right side of the coffin. In Borike by Rogatica (east Bosnia) the male bones are put beside the head of the last deceased and the female beside the feet.

<sup>5</sup> In Monte Negro a red scarf is mentioned. Matičetov (note 33) quotes: "There are two isolated examples that white colour is not the only colour: 1. for wrapping the bones they bought 1 meter of red linen (41); 2. they would wrap the bones of an unmarried person in white linen and married in black" (28), (M. Matičetov, 1955, 240).

In Bribir by Crikvenica (the Croatian Littoral) the bones of the relatives are put on the coffin up to the head, and the other bones down to the feet.

Beside the examples mentioned in the region of Livno the Orthodox Serbs from Ivoševci, Kistanje, Biovično selo (all surrounding Knin) put the dug out bones in the coffin of the “newly died” person. It is done the same way in Monte Negro (near Budva), southeast Serbia (near Vranjska Banja) and in Macedonia (near Kičevo).

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 In Kordun and Banija (Croatia), in northwest Bosnia (sometimes in east Bosnia by the Orthodox) and here and there in Serbia in the dug out grave some money is thrown in order to “buy a place”. In Serbia and Macedonia, after 6 week or 6 months, some magic action were done in the dug out graves. For example, if someone died from tuberculosis (*jektika, sušica*) a bottle of wine (or plum-brandy) is put with him in the grave, so after the exhumation in a determined time, the bottle was taken out and given to family to drink (especially to the children). There are some magic actions and fortune-telling which are done with the bones or parts of the skeleton; in Dupljaj by Valjevo (Serbia) a woman clasps the bones of her dead child to her bosom so that she can have more children. In Slavonski Kobaš (Croatia) the bones are kissed with an explanation that, “God forgives sins to those who kiss dead bones”. In the village Slepče by Bitola (Macedonia) they tie a red thread around one bone, or put in the grave a bottle of water, some grain, flour, salt or even a new suit (Serbia, Macedonia). This confirms the complexity of the custom in which are incorporated elements of different cultural patterns and traditions, sometimes much wider from the observed cycle. Data that confirms similarity or is identical with some elements of the double burial custom is significant with the “first” funeral but is out of the frame of the church rituals. For example, in the region of Kočani (east Macedonia) during the “second” burial (after 3 years), relatives, friends and neighbours are invited to lunch; in Bijela by Daruvar, Slavonia, the Serbs remember that there were “intended” exhumation after a year and on that occasion the grave-diggers were invited to lunch. Similar, but incomplete descriptions refer to some villages near Bor in east Serbia. Unfortunately there are no other data, which would complete this “picture”.

Even so, this data contributes the conviction of the thesis such as is the double burial custom, which is accompanied with series of rituals of considerable regional differences. The purpose (or explanation) why is the custom and the rituals done, also the different terms can help in revealing its nature. The research must continue and that depends on the aim of the research.

The explanation, that disinterring is done because of great grief, (mainly when the children are concerned), usually before the year is out, is unspecific and incomplete, and such a procedure cannot be interpreted as the “real” *double burial*.

*Meeting and seeing the deceased* as reasons for digging up (disinterring) the graves are insufficient explanation for the whole procedure and are only a part of a very complex custom, exactly only one part of beliefs in the posthumous customs. The contents of the rituals that follow the whole procedure (washing the bones, pouring wine upon the bones, kissing them, wrapping and burying them again, etc.) surpass the given reasons. In the east and southeast regions (where it mostly occurs), it could be

considered as “real” *double burial* due to the explanation; “...to be sure that the body has rotted; “...the soul is absolutely free to go to heaven only when the body has completely rotted”, (Petar Vlahović, Beograd, 1972, 62). If it is believed that the deceased could become a vampire (or werewolf), or if the extent of his sinfulness has to do with it, than that belongs to other contents.

Disinterring which is justified with an explanation such as: “...let the sun warm the bones once more” or “...let the sun shine upon the bones” or “...let the bones see the light once more”, and followed by rituals, as well as special treatment with the skull, could be also considered as “original” or “real” *double burial*.<sup>6</sup>

In the course of this it is possible to emphasise few basic elements:

- a) believing in life after death and the duality of existence (material and spiritual)
- b) special meaning of skull and the relation towards it as probable substitute
- c) believing in exceptional importance of the Sun, that is, the Light

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Each of these elements hasn't got the same significance or value on the research territory, neither each of the rituals, which are their component parts. In relation towards the posthumous remains dualism is noted. It is expressed in the respect and piety towards the remains because of duty, love or fear, or as taboo (avoiding or forbidding disinterring the graves).

It is necessary to emphasise the important elements which, are *diferentia specifica* of the whole problem:

- a) ritual digging out the deceased without burying other deceased in the same grave
- b) intentional digging up the grave (the ritual with the posthumous remains) and burying the other deceased in the same grave
- c) accidental (or after many decades) digging up the grave; the procedure with posthumous remains and burying the other deceased.

As we can see, it is a custom of very complex structure for understanding. It is necessary to research the reference data and facts outside its narrow frame; to search for an important indicator in the wider posthumous customs and ritual cycle; to prefer multidisciplinary approach, so that historical, social, cultural and religious aspect, influenced its beginning and its disappearance, would be included. In the procedure of disinterring the grave and repeated burial a large number of variants make the correct systematisation and conclusion difficult. Especially because it is a very heterogeneous cultural (and traditional) territory, which was exposed for a long period to various influences, frequent migrations and changes of systems and orientations.

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<sup>6</sup> On the basis of data concerning this custom, it is difficult to establish a thesis about worshipping the Sun or worshipping the skull. The significance of the Sun and light is not debatable. For example, burning candles in general or burning candles for 40 days while the bones are laid in the church (in the surroundings of Ohrid and further in Aegean Macedonia). But in posthumous rituals we even note quite the opposite behaviour – from avoiding disinterring the grave to avoiding leaving the grave open (“so that it wouldn't get wet (rain); that hail doesn't destroy the crops”, etc.); disinterring the grave in order to see if the body has rotted, because of suspicion that the deceased turned into a vampire or gained some saintly attributes; the degree of his sinfulness, colour of his bones and their symbolics. We could discuss here the worship of the ancestors too.

A comprehensive elaboration of the ethnological data from the Questionnaire, completed with comparative material and cognition, can offer a major help in solving the problem. A well-done typology for a cartographic presentation and elaboration of ethnological charts, would be an important contribution in that direction.

A broader knowledge could make it clear, why are riches and varieties of customs, (not only of these customs and rituals), a rich treasury in which mass ideology as political category presents its ambition as the will of the people. Using myths and rituals and adjusting them to new (mass) folk pattern, such politics creates a negative attitude in interpretation of tradition, and intrudes "worshipping the past" and affirming neo-conservatism.

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#### BESEDA O AVTORJU

Branko Đaković, dr., docent na Oddelku za etnologiju Filozofske fakultete v Zagrebu. Področja njegovoga zanimanja in raziskovanja so: ruralno stavbarstvo in bivalna kultura, tradicionalno gospodarstvo, družbeno življenje in šege.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Branko Đaković, Ph.D., is assistant professor at the Department of Ethnology, Faculty of Arts, Zagreb. His field of interest: rural architecture and dwelling culture, traditional economics, social life and customs.