

Lines of Descent in Alternative Spirituality: Experiencing the Agency of Ancestors through Spiritual Energy

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This paper presents the results of ethnographic research carried out in Bratislava, the capital of Slovakia, among people who adhere to various spiritual ideas and practices. I consider the role of lines of descent in shaping how people experience the agency of the dead. I argue that, within urban spiritual milieus, descent lines are linked to the concept of energy that connects the world of the deceased with that of the living. Specific cultural settings influence the concept of personhood and, consequently, experiences of the agency of ancestors. A focus on individualism, combined with a moral emphasis on personal development, gives rise to specific interpretations of these experiences, as well as to a specific type of essentialism grounded in moral reasoning.

KEYWORDS: alternative spirituality, the agency of the dead, ancestors, spiritual energy, moral essentialism

Članek predstavlja rezultate etnografske raziskave, izvedene v Bratislavi, glavnem mestu Slovaške, med ljudmi, ki sledijo različnim duhovnim idejam in praksam. Obravnavam vlogo rodovnih linij pri oblikovanju načina, kako ljudje doživljajo delovanje mrtvih. Trdim, da so znotraj urbanih duhovnih miljejev rodovne linije povezane s konceptom energije, ki povezuje svet pokojnih s svetom živih. Specifična kulturna okolja vplivajo na pojmovanje osebnosti oziroma osebe in posledično na izkušnje delovanja prednikov. Osredotočenost na individualizem, skupaj z moralnim poudarkom na osebnem razvoju, vodi do specifičnih interpretacij teh izkušenj ter do posebne vrste esencializma, utemeljenega na moralnem presojanju.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: alternativna duhovnost, delovanje mrtvih, predniki, duhovna energija, moralni esencializem

INTRODUCTION

In various theories within the social sciences and humanities, the dead are understood as active participants in social life, linked to social organisation, emotions, the physical environment, political power and digital representations (e.g. Harper, 2010; Crandall, Martin, 2014; Hudson, 2023). In anthropological studies, the general category of the dead includes the important concept of ancestors, which began to develop through the influential ethnographic debates of the 1960s, in which African ancestors became the prototypes for those in other world regions (Hill, Hageman, 2016). It was demonstrated that in traditional societies, the agency of ancestors has been manifested through their

ongoing influence or active presence in the lives of the living achieved through cultural practices, such as rituals, storytelling, and totemic or clan systems, etc. Within this context, lines of descent – understood as socially recognised genealogical connections between ancestors and descendants – play an important role (Itao, Kaneko, 2022). Here, descent is conceived not merely as biological lineage but as the transmission of spiritual essence, vital force or ancestral power. Many related cultural practices are based on altered states of consciousness (hereinafter ASC), which are supposed to facilitate contact with the spiritual realm (see, for example, Boddy, 1994; Glidden, 1995; Payne, 2012; Hume, 2013; Igreja, 2018; Richman, 2020; Ciofalo, 2023; Roothaan, Bello, 2024).

Today, ancestors as a distinct category of the dead have also emerged in the context of alternative spiritual movements, especially in neo-paganism, which seeks to revive ancestral religions, as well as in urban shamanism, which draws on various traditions – again, with a focus on ancestors as bearers of sacred or spiritual knowledge. These spiritual currents, however, do not constitute a unified movement; rather, they comprise a diverse set of concepts and practices that do not always assume institutionalised or at least organised forms. In Europe and North America, they have gradually gained importance since the mid-twentieth century (Heelas, 1996; Sutcliffe, Bowman, 2000; Heelas et al., 2005; Aupers, Houtman, 2010). At present, alternative spiritual currents are no longer a phenomenon limited to a comparatively marginal subculture. As Wouter Hanegraaf (2000: 289) observes, they have developed into a form of broad “folk religion” that appeals to many people across different social strata. In Central and Eastern Europe, the growth of alternative spiritual currents has taken place in a specific way, shaped significantly by the political context and the officially negative attitude to religions during the socialist era. The fall of communist regimes in the 1990s not only changed the situation of established churches, but also opened the doors for new forms of spirituality (Tižik, 2006; Smoczyński, 2016; Ališauskienė, 2017; Dyndová, 2020).

In spiritual milieux, the connection between the notion of spiritual energy and ASC also plays an important role in both individual and collective practices (e.g. Luhrmann, 1989; Greenwood, 2000; Butler, 2015; Davy, 2023). However, the connection between spiritual energy and lines of descent – so important in the context of traditional societies – has not yet been sufficiently explored, although the category of ancestors plays an important role in relevant ethnographic studies (e.g. Butler, 2015; Galovič, 2021; Seigfried, 2021; Davy, 2023; Dyndová, 2024). In this paper, I present the results of ethnographic research carried out in Bratislava, the capital of Slovakia, among people who adhere to various spiritual ideas and practices, especially urban shamanism and Wicca, a nature-based neo-pagan movement. In my analysis, I will consider the following questions:

- What is the role of lines of descent in people’s experiences with the dead?
- How are lines of descent connected to the concept of spiritual energy?

I argue that people’s experiences of the agency of ancestors are influenced by concrete cultural settings because the interpretation of such experiences depends on culture-specific notions of personhood. Therefore, (1) in the context of urban spiritual milieux, descent lines connect the world of the dead and the world of the living by means of spiritual energy through which people experience the agency of the dead; and (2) the emphasis on

personal spiritual development and individual responsibility, characteristic of contemporary spirituality, results in specific interpretations of the agency of ancestors conditioned by moral essentialism.

In the first section of this paper, I will address relevant theoretical ideas and empirical studies, and will explore the specific cultural conditions of spiritual milieu. Subsequently, I will describe my fieldwork and present the results of analysis of ethnographic data. I will interpret my interlocutors' accounts through theories that consider the universal properties of the human mind as well as cultural diversity and individual experiences.

THE AGENCY OF ANCESTORS AND THE CONCEPT OF PERSONHOOD IN SPIRITUAL MILIEUX

Many ethnographic studies have demonstrated that the concept of spiritual energy or force is widely distributed across cultures. It is typically described as non-material and connected with life, consciousness, or the soul. In India, for example, it is referred to as *prana*, a life-sustaining force of living beings; in Afro-Brazilian religions the notion of *axé* is understood as an invisible force that is both magical and sacred, fundamental to all existence, whether physical or spiritual; in Polynesia, the concept of *mana* refers to divine powers that are diffused and transmitted throughout the universe; and in Chinese philosophy the term *ch'i (qi)* describes an energetic fluid that vitalises the body and circulates outside us as air (Roazzi et al., 2015: 145–146).

Experiences of the agency of ancestors through spiritual force occur across cultures in many forms. In this context, altered states of consciousness serve as a medium through which the living may invoke, perceive, or embody the dead (e.g. Payne, 2012; Richman, 2020). One of the most widespread ideas is possession, understood as the temporary loss of control over an individual's body, which is believed to be controlled by spirits or ancestors. Through possession, the dead actively intervene in moral, social or political affairs, correcting injustices or delivering messages (Boddy, 1994; Cohen, 2008; Igreja, 2018). Dreams are also a common medium for ancestral communication, especially in societies where dreamtime is considered part of a sacred cosmology (e.g. Hume, 2013). Another widespread notion is the shamanic journey, during which a shaman uses ASC to contact spirits or ancestors in order to solve the problems of individuals or a community (Atkinson, 1992). In contemporary urban environments, these traditional practices have given rise to spiritual movements such as urban shamanism or neo-shamanism.

The emergence of this movement has been ascribed to the post-war transformation caused by the decline of the great colonial empires and the rise of national movements in Third World countries. In this process, non-Western traditions – formerly seen as backward and irrational – were re-interpreted in terms of the universal spirituality of humankind (Znamenski, 2007). Since the 1970s, the world-wide non-profit organisation Foundation for Shamanic Studies has promoted “core shamanism”, an inclusive and universalist concept based on the re-interpretation of many native traditions (Foundation for Shamanic Studies, n.d.a). It should be noted, however, that in contemporary spiritual

milieux there are many other versions of shamanism, and the term “shamanism” can have various meanings (Kehoe, 1997: 307). Also, the term “shaman” can be synonymous with “magic practitioner” (Magliocco, 2015).

Magic and witchcraft are central notions in Wicca, a neo-pagan, syncretic religion centred on the worship of nature through the maintenance of sacred tradition and knowledge. Thus, it also concentrates on nature and ancestral traditions; however, in contrast to the universalism of neo-shamanism, ancestors in Wicca are understood as the peoples of Northern and Western Europe. Wicca emerged in mid twentieth-century Britain and was first presented as the survival of an ancient pre-Christian Cult, in which witches were interpreted as servants of a Goddess and her husband. After spreading to North America, it diversified under the influence of environmentalism, feminism and the 1960s counter-culture. It came to be presented as a Goddess-centred religion based on witchcraft as a form of nature veneration, a representation that was popularised by mass media. Wicca has developed into various branches including “Gardnerian Wicca”, which claims direct lineage from Gerald Gardner who established this religious movement; “Dianic Wicca”, shaped by second-wave feminism; and “Reclaiming Witchcraft”, a form of feminist “ecospirituality”. At present, Wicca counts hundreds of thousands of adherents worldwide (Pearson, 2002; White, 2015).

In neo-pagan movements and neo-shamanism, both deceased family members and distant ancestors are represented as conscious beings who can guide people’s decisions, intervene in matters of protection or healing, and offer wisdom or warnings through dreams, signs, and mediumship (e.g. Greenwood, 2000; Butler, 2015; Seigfried, 2021; Davy, 2023). People with alternative worldviews often seek a reconnection with their ancestral roots, a phenomenon particularly well documented in contexts of colonial displacement or cultural loss (e.g. Lan, 1985; Lebaka, 2019; Podolecka, Nthoi, 2021; Ciofalo, 2023). Importantly, in contemporary spiritual milieux, deceased family members can be represented as sources of energy providing empowerment through dream visions or ASC (e.g. Bowman, 2002; Magliocco, 2015; Ivnik, 2025). Due to the eclectic nature of contemporary spirituality, both shamans and neo-pagans can use various spiritual techniques that are not tied to concrete movements or currents. One of the most popular forms of ritualised healing of relationships by means of connection with deceased family members is a specific practice called the Family Constellation method. It is commonly understood as a psychotherapeutic approach that aims to reveal unconscious patterns and entanglements that may be causing present-day difficulties for individuals, thereby helping them to understand and potentially resolve these issues.¹ In spiritual milieux, this method can be combined with esoteric ideas and overlaps with energetic healing (Gyimesi, 2023). Deceased family members and lineage play a central role in such interpretations of psychological problems.²

¹ The Family Constellation method is considered a trans-generational, phenomenological, therapeutic intervention with roots in family systems therapy, existential phenomenology, and the ancestor reverence of the South African Zulus (Cohen, 2006). It is recognised by family therapy associations in many countries; however, its blending of ritual and therapy provokes significant scepticism in clinical psychology circles, especially regarding its lack of clinical standardisation and its quasi-spiritual elements (Boring, 2012).

² See, for instance Zen My Mind, n.d.

Experiences of the agency of the dead – particularly in the case of deceased family members or ancestors – can be influenced by personal relationships and family stories. In general, anthropologists have tended to emphasise that the meanings of agency differ substantially across different social, cultural and historical contexts. In addition to the agency of living human beings, this category includes relational and more-than-human forms of agency, such as the agency of spirits or supernatural beings (Vorhölter, 2024). In the cognitive theory of religion proposed by Pascal Boyer (2001), human agents are defined as beings that possess mental features, such as desires, beliefs, memories, intentions and expectations; and supernatural agents are depicted as beings that possess all these mental features, while simultaneously violating fundamental expectations of human agency – for example, by not having a physical body, or by being able to fly or pass through walls. In elaboration of this theory, Emma Cohen and Justin Barrett (2011) shift the focus from human agency *per se* to the concept of personhood as the core of intuitive reasoning about supernatural agents and human agency in general.

The concept of personhood includes elements such as mentality, vitality and identity. Intuitions on mentality are produced by intuitive psychology (theory of mind), a set of brain structures and functions specialised in tasks such as detecting the presence of agents, figuring out their goals, and representing their thoughts and expectations (Boyer, 2001: 123). Intuitions on vitality are produced by another complex cognitive system called intuitive biology, which is grounded in ideas of biological essence or vital force: people intuitively expect that each biological species

has an underlying causal nature, or essence, that is uniquely responsible for the typical appearance, behaviour and ecological preferences of the kind. People in diverse cultures consider this essence responsible for the organism's identity as a complex, self-preserving entity governed by dynamic internal processes that are lawful even when hidden. (Atran, 1998: 548)

This causal-explanatory mechanism called “vitalistic causality” is therefore connected to some sort of essentialist intuitive theory (Roazzi et al., 2015: 150).

From this point of view, the idea that spiritual energy is transmitted through descent lines (e.g. ancestors, sacred bloodlines, shamanic inheritance) can be understood as emerging from several intertwined cognitive mechanisms:

- agent detection (Bering, 2002): ancestors are conceptualised as conscious presences;
- intuitive dualism (Barret et al., 2021): the soul is seen as separable from the body and thus capable of being inherited or passing from one body to another;
- teleological thinking (Scott, 2022): lineage is viewed as a purpose-driven force;
- psychological essentialism (Neufeld, 2022): a tendency to think that members of a certain category, including biological kinds and families, possess an underlying, unchangeable essence that defines their identity and properties.

In my interpretation, I will pay special attention to essentialism as a core aspect of human psychology that emerges and develops in early childhood. As Neufeld (2022) notices, recent empirical research indicates that essentialist thinking is rather complex,

arising from multiple early-emerging cognitive tendencies that converge during development. Ethnographic data also demonstrates that essentialism facilitates the emergence and transmission of various culturally wide-spread notions, including possession concepts (Cohen, 2008). Essentialist thinking is especially important in relation to the notions of personhood and inheritance, as it strongly influences how people view their identity (Marchery et al., 2023) and produces an intuition that personal traits or an invisible essence characteristic of a certain group are inherited (Bastian, Haslam, 2006; Wagner, 2024). Cohen and Barrett suggest, however, that the universal cognitive mechanisms underlying the concept of personhood may be activated in different ways depending on varying concepts, contexts and cultures.

In this regard, we can consider the ideas of Anthony Giddens (1991). He argues that in traditional cultures, individual lives correspond to stability of place, relationships and occupation, whereas in modern industrialised cultures, the course of life is composed of individual narratives that link different places, relationships and occupations. It has also been noted that in European and Western countries, the concept of personhood is influenced by individualism as an important aspect of Western cultural values (e.g. Howard, 2007; Joshanloo, Weijers, 2024). Indeed, it has been demonstrated that specific cultural settings in European urban milieux influence the formation of patterns of personhood that differ from those found in traditional societies (e.g. Kahaka, Maundeni, 2022).

Alternative spirituality is marked by a special accent on individuality. Despite the diversity of alternative spiritual currents, they share a common idea of an inner dimension, which places emphasis on personal spirituality and the “inner self” in contrast to institutionalised religions (Houtman, Tromp, 2021: 55; Houtman, Aupers, 2010: 6–7). In relation to the abovementioned theory – which explains ideas of personhood in terms of both the universal properties of the human mind and cultural context – we can ask: how is essentialist thinking manifested in accounts of people’s experiences with the dead in these concrete cultural settings?

In the next section of the paper, I will describe fieldwork that I have carried out in Bratislava, the capital of Slovakia, among people who are presently interested in various versions of shamanism, as well as other spiritual teachings, including Wicca.

FIELDWORK

The most recent census in Slovakia (Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic, 2021) demonstrated that the country’s religious structure has undergone certain changes during recent decades. It seems that the spiritual scene in Slovakia is both growing and becoming more complex.³ It is also important to note that different parts of the country

³ The census showed that the number of people belonging to the major churches has fallen, while the number of non-religious people has risen significantly. The largest group remains those identifying as Roman Catholic (3.04 million), accounting for up to 55.8% of the whole population. However, in comparison with the previous census in 2011, both their number and proportion have decreased by more than six percentage points, representing a decline of over 308,700 people. The second largest group (almost 1.3 million) consists of individuals with no

vary in terms of religious affiliation (Tížik, 2022; Nemčíková et al., 2023). Although no statistical data is yet available on the distribution of spiritual ideas and practices, it can reasonably be assumed that their spread is uneven. It appears likely that they are more readily embraced by urban populations, whereas rural areas are characterised by stronger adherence to Christianity.

My present fieldwork began in Bratislava in September 2023. I examined the world-views of three groups: (1) people engaged in various forms of shamanic practice; (2) people who attend events organised by the Wicca circle in Bratislava; and (3) people who hold spiritual views and/or engage in various spiritual practices without regularly participating in spiritual meetings. It should be noted that interlocutors across all three categories tend to combine various spiritual ideas in individual ways.

In my investigation of shamanic practices, I continued my previous research on neo-shamanism. The main role in the formation of neo-shamanic groups in Slovakia in the 1990s and the 2000s was played by the European branch of the Foundation for Shamanic Studies (hereinafter FSS), located in Vienna. I became familiar with this milieu in Bratislava in 2004 and carried out ethnographic research there between 2009 and 2011 (Bužeková, 2012). Since then, I have been in contact with people practicing shamanism in various forms. In my present research, I interviewed people attending FSS events as well as people who do not adhere to the concept of core shamanism and understand the word “shaman” in different ways.

Wicca has gained popularity in Slovakia in recent decades. It should be noted that private rituals associated with Wicca are dispersed and mostly invisible in public spaces. However, during the last decade, a circle has emerged in Bratislava that meets regularly on various occasions, including public rituals. It was formed around people who are connected to Wiccans in the UK. Due to their activities, Wicca has entered the media space and become attractive to spiritual seekers, despite opposition from Christian churches. The core of the Wicca circle is a coven – a closed group performing rituals not accessible to the public. Another “layer” of the circle consists of people who regularly attend workshops and the school of natural magic, established in Bratislava. Many of them also attend and/or organise other spiritual meetings, combining Wicca teachings with other ideas, such as Slavic neo-paganism or urban shamanism (see Bužeková, 2024).

So far, I have conducted 34 informal, semi-structured and in-depth interviews with 23 women and 7 men of various age categories (born between 1947 and 1991). Most of them experienced the political changes of the 1990s as adults or adolescents and have higher education. I have also carried out 15 instances of participant observation at various

religious affiliation. Their proportion increased from 13.4% in 2011 to 23.8% in 2021 (Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic, 2021). This change does not necessarily reflect an increase in non-belief but may indicate the increasing popularity of “unchurched spiritualities” (Watts, 2022) and can be linked to a growing percentage of people in the world who identify as spiritual but not religious (SBNR, see Fuller, 2001; Wixwat, Saucier, 2021; Tížik, 2023). In addition, 4,007 residents identify with the new census category “Paganism and natural spirituality”. It is also important to note that many spiritual practices are understood as forms of therapy (see, for example, Jerotijević, Hagovská, 2019; Jerotijević, 2025).

events organised by the FSS and the Wiccan circle, as well as at private meetings. In addition, I paid attention to my interlocutors' communication on social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram.

I maintain friendly relationships with my interlocutors whom I have known for a long time from my previous research. These relationships involve the mutual sharing of personal information as well as spiritual ideas. In addition to publicly accessible online communication, I have access to private communication in two closed WhatsApp groups and a private Facebook group, which helps me to maintain relationships with my interlocutors. My membership in these groups is based on mutual trust. All my interlocutors have been informed about my research and agree to participate. I do not use private information as research data without permission. At the same time, my deeper knowledge of their lives helps me better understand their ideas.

In the next section, I will present my interlocutors' experiences of deceased family members and ancestors through spiritual energy, and will pay attention to the role of descent lines in their accounts.⁴ I will demonstrate that, in urban spiritual milieux, the notion of spiritual energy permeating the universe influences the concept of personhood, especially in terms of essentialist thinking. At the same time, the emphasis on personal development as one of the main characteristics of alternative spirituality results in a special type of essentialism involving moral reasoning.

ANCESTORS AND LINES OF DESCENT

Giselle Vincett and Linda Woodhead (2009: 333) argue that contemporary spirituality often bears the imprint of an eco-discourse. This aspect is linked to the sacralisation of nature and the Romantic idea of a return to the ancestors' natural way of life (Luhmann, 1993; Stuckrad, 2002; Sage, 2009). Due to this Romantic emphasis on the past, ancestors often play a central role in spiritual ideas. This is particularly evident in Wicca, a neo-pagan movement in which ancestors are linked to Mother Earth and nature. Samuel (born in 1991), the leader of the Wiccan circle in Bratislava, describes the goal of the coven "The circle of Avalon Flame", in which he serves as the high priest, as follows:

... to bring people back to our ancient traditions and to Mother Earth. For everyone to find strength and help in their ancestors, healing and answers in nature, and love and harmony in the little things and rituals of everyday life. (Samuel, 1991)

Samuel and his circle follow the tradition of hedge witches, a specific kind of witches described in historical sources and ethnographies of British folk magic. They are believed to possess the ability to "ride the hedge" – that is, to traverse the boundary between the physical and spiritual worlds – and are known for their deep connection with nature,

⁴ The names of my interlocutors are pseudonymized.

particularly plants and herbs (Hutton, 2017; Van der Hoeven, 2022). Samuel emphasised the great importance of nature and ancestors both in interviews and during a seminar on communication with the dead that I attended in November 2023.

In neo-shamanism the romanticised concepts of nature and the “noble savage” are especially significant. As Dyndová (2024: 54) notices, ancient and indigenous peoples are portrayed as living in harmony with nature and possessing deep spiritual insight; contemporary shamans seek to reconnect with their lost knowledge, viewing it as a path to authentic spiritual life. Robert (born in 1963), a leader of the FSS circle in Bratislava, repeatedly referred to ancestors as teachers and guides for their descendants.

When referring to ancestors, both Samuel and Robert use the expression *rodové línie* – the Slovak equivalent of lines of descent. It should be noted that this term is derived from *rod* – a Slavic word encompassing meanings such as genus, family, clan or generations. In their accounts, *rodové línie* are primarily mentioned in connection with recurring family problems that are transmitted energetically. Both Samuel and Robert teach that dysfunction emerging in a family line can be changed after seven generations, echoing the idea of the healing power of seven generations of ancestors found in family constellation practice. Both leaders emphasise individual responsibility for one’s actions, linking it to the notion of ancestors. While Samuel interprets *rodové línie* in scientific terms – such as DNA or psychological notions like blocks and traumas – Robert speaks about a karmic connection with *rod*, stressing that people must be aware that any problem may persist but can also be stopped:

We live our lives and by our actions we create the conditions for the next seven generations and we shape the world. It is important that our children know the genesis of our lineage. The ancestors are now aware of their mistakes, they want to pass on this knowledge to us, what they could not or did not manage to do in their lifetimes. They are very happy to advise us because they are our roots. “Rod” is like a tree where we are the leaves. Keep your roots, live them within you, don’t separate yourself from the roots. You never know how the ancestors will be able to help you and your children. (Robert, 1963)

Samuel and Robert often use the impersonal category of ancestors, which can be expressed in ethnic terms. Both speak about “roots” in terms of concrete cultural traditions that are important for their circles. Samuel leads his circle primarily in a British Celtic tradition, while Robert is oriented towards Slavic heritage, although in the early stages of his practice he was fascinated by Native American traditions. His interest in local traditions was prompted by a vision experienced during an initiation ritual:⁵

⁵ FSS courses are organised hierarchically, beginning with a basic seminar and culminating in a three-years shamanic training programme. Upon successful completion, participants undergo an initiation and receive a certificate of completion that gives them the right to teach core shamanism (Foundation for Shamanic Studies, n.d.b). At present, Robert is the only active FSS lecturer in Slovakia. Thus, his emphasis on this vision during initiation indicates the importance of Slavic ancestors for the formation of shamanic circles in Slovakia.

During initiation, you pick up a small stone and you shuffle. And ... the song came to me that I was supposed to sing, so I sang it. So, I sang – give me the answer, give me the answer, give me the answer. And all of a sudden, I was just looking at the tree, and it had eyes, and it said to me: “Well, now calm down and look where you live. Why were you born here? This is the land of your ancestors. You don’t look there; you should. But look for what is hidden, what is rejected.” Well, that was the beginning of my search for my Slovak roots, for the culture, for the customs, for the things that were taken away from us and rewritten by other cultures. (Robert, 1963)

Ethnic categories, such as Slovaks, Slavs or Celts belong to the common manifestations of psychological essentialism. Essentialist thinking produces expectations that, despite superficial differences, members of ethnic groups share certain characteristics and behaviours; and that personal traits or an invisible essence are inherited (Bastian, Haslam, 2006; Wagner, 2024). In a spiritual context, however, this “ethnic” essence is associated with spiritual traditions. Samuel refers to Celtic shamanism as the main spiritual tradition in Bratislava, but he also mentions other traditions, interpreting them in essentialist terms and in connection with lines of descent:

For example, those from Cuba, there very strong ancestral energy is passing through those descent lines. Spirituality is very alive there, so the cult of ancestors and folk magic is very deeply ingrained in everyday life ... The Slovaks have a very good history, and also mysticism from fairy tales and folk beliefs. They are very good at magic or sorcery, but here people are spoiled by Christianity ... Yet there are many amazing healers here. It’s very similar to Russian female healers. I also see a great similarity with Bulgarians, I studied with a witch in Bulgaria, and I must say that these things are very similar. (Samuel, 1991)

It should be noted that both Samuel and Robert also interpret their own spiritual abilities in essentialist terms, as an innate gift allowing them to communicate with the Otherworld more effectively than others. They describe this capacity as manifesting from childhood – both considered themselves different from other children, as they could behave strangely and could have visions. Later, they perceived their special abilities differently. While Robert began to understand his gift only in adulthood, Samuel interprets it in relation to his mother’s spiritual talent, which he inherited and cultivated, also under the influence of the “Gypsy magic” practiced by his paternal relatives (see Bužeková, 2024; 2025).

Lena (born in 1974) attends events organised by Samuel’s circle, but she is also involved in the Slavic neo-pagan movement and is inclined towards Slavic spiritual heritage:

Slavs lived in harmony with nature and spirituality. Even according to the history of everything, and Samuel doesn’t like it when I tell him this, but basically all of Wicca has Slavic foundations. Well, he doesn’t like it very

much, but it's true because Slavs really lived all the way across Europe even as far as England. It's even claimed that King Arthur was a Slav ... I'm more drawn to the Slavic tradition because it's my roots, so I'm literally drawn to them. (Lena, 1974)

Participants in the spiritual meetings led by Robert and Samuel, however, mostly apply the notion of ancestors to their family members. Their interpretations are diverse and display elements of teachings absorbed during various spiritual meetings. All my interlocutors associated the expression *rodové linie* with family constellation practices, and most of them had attended such therapy sessions at least once. Repeated attendance of these sessions does not mean that the problems they bring there are being resolved only with limited success – on the contrary, it manifests both their satisfaction and their growing interest in this practice. When they are relieved and find meaning in their experiences, they return with further problems to solve. Their accounts focus on concrete persons and concrete problems, with individual experiences playing a central role. For example, Ragnar (born in 1985) attends Robert's seminars as well as meetings of a men's circle – a group in which participants share their inner experiences.⁶ He says:

Descent issues, those from our families, which we've inherited by being born into that family, in my opinion, are a very big factor. Ancestors have a very great influence. And I personally think that what my ancestors experienced has been embedded in me. I know people who, for example, have a great, very paralysing fear of going to sleep in the woods. One person, in particular, found out that his great-great-grandmother died in the woods. She was practically knocked over by a tree and she died there, and she was seven or eight months pregnant. And it's just extremely difficult for him to go to the woods. And nothing bad has happened to him before. But I think these things are being healed in these circles because people talk about them, they recognise them. (Ragnar, 1985)

The idea of personal traits that are inherited through an underlying essence corresponds to one component of psychological essentialism, which is called innate potential. It produces the assumption that essences are inherited and determined at birth (Neufeld, 2022). Importantly, in my interlocutors' accounts, this inherited essence is a form of spiritual energy that pervades the entire universe.

LINES OF DESCENT AND SPIRITUAL ENERGY

My interlocutors mostly conceptualise lines of descent as interconnections between generations through concrete individuals. In this regard, it is important to note that perceptions

⁶ For more on this type of meeting, which has recently gained popularity, see, for example Luz, 2024.

of the individual are always conditioned by the concept of personhood existing in a given cultural context; and in spiritual milieux, personhood is inseparable from the notion of energy. For example, Dick Houtman and Paul Tromp (2021: 55) consider several logically interrelated ideas that are central to the spiritual worldviews in Europe, including the belief that the entire universe originates from one universal spiritual energy that permeates all life, and that every person has a higher spiritual “self” that can be awakened and enlightened because the divine does not reside outside, but within every person. Houtman and Aupers argue that the spiritual self

is conceived as laying hidden behind, beyond, or underneath the mundane self and it is believed to be intimately tied up with a universal force or energy... that holistically pervades and connects ‘all’, that is, nature, society and the cosmos. (Houtman, Aupers, 2010: 6)

In the context of Central Europe, energy as a key concept of alternative spiritual currents was discussed by Helena Dyndová (2025) and Zuzana Kostíćová (2023; 2025).

This idea is present in all my interlocutors’ accounts. From the Wiccan point of view, universal energy is supposed to pervade all people, both the living and the dead, and is seen as a channel connecting them. Energy or force is conceptualised in terms of natural magic. As Samuel says:

Magic or witchcraft is the movement of natural forces in order to bring about the necessary change. Energy is present in all things – in us, in plants, in stones, in colours, in sounds and movements. (Samuel, 1991)

To communicate with the dead through energy, people use various practices, in which ASC plays an important role. During a seminar on communication with the dead, Samuel was teaching participants techniques such as visualisation – intended to convey the essence of ancestral spirits – and automatic writing, through which deceased family members were supposed to convey their messages to the living. In addition, participants were also taught “modern pagan practices” that do not require ASC such as placing crystals and flowers on ancestral graves, using candles from the cemetery in cases of haunting, or burning candles during mourning periods to help the dead become ancestors. At the end of the seminar, participants received a gift – a bell that could be used to summon ancestors when needed. Samuel encouraged everyone to create ancestral altars at home, displaying photographs and objects that belonged to deceased family members.

In the context of neo-shamanism, ancestors constitute a central theme in two FSS seminars – “Death and dying from the perspective of shamanism” and “Visionary dance”. The first one focuses on the interaction between the living and the dead, especially ancestors, and on how shamans can help the souls of the deceased get to the “other side”, that is, become ancestors. The related shamanic journeys to the Otherworld always involve ASC, typically induced by drumming, and are explained in terms of spiritual energy. In the second seminar, participants learn how to perform a special dance derived from

ancestral traditions, through which ancestors can convey their message and help their descendants change unwanted situations. Again, the dance involves ASC, understood in terms of energy. As Robert describes it:

And they [ancestors] actually come. They give you information through the dance, so they tell you what to do or what you should, what you should quit or what's burdensome for you. They have a message for you that you should be receiving through that dance, through that energy from the dance. (Robert, 1963)

Practitioners who do not occupy leading positions apply the general notion of ancestors to concrete family members. Energy and ASC play a central role in their accounts of lineage and inherited personal traits. This aspect reflects another component of essentialist thinking – intrinsicity, the idea that essences are intrinsic and not socially acquired (Neufeld, 2022). Although, in a spiritual context, such intrinsic essence is understood as a universal form of energy, people's diverse stories demonstrate that their interpretations are linked to their lives and concrete circumstances. Unlike the generalised notions of energy and ancestors found in leaders' accounts, other practitioners provided "personalised" depictions of how energy works through descent lines.

For example, Iveta (born in 1983) is a birth doula. She does not attend any spiritual meetings. She comes from a Christian family and received a religious education. However, she is not a believer and as an adult she became deeply interested in spiritual teachings. Her interest emerged from her experiences of giving birth to her three children, which also led her to pursue work as a doula. In her worldview, the concept of reincarnation and the notion of the soul as a form of energy are prominent:

I think I gained inner strength and a mission with each birth. I grew so much internally through these births, and it occurred to me that maybe I could offer something to other women, that I can pass something on to them ... I always told my children that their souls had come. They were angels before, and they came as souls into my belly and connected with my body. It is a big topic for me. I tell my children that when someone dies, they become an angel again, that they come back again. Since I am not a believer, I struggled for a long time with how to grasp the whole thing. Because I don't pray to anyone, I don't believe that God exists, but I imagine that there is something out there, let's call it angelic management ... These souls simply come into the world with a task, a mission, something they are supposed to leave behind and accomplish. And when their time is up, they leave. Since I don't have a concept of God and have never delved deeply into the stories of the Bible, I probably had to create something as a child or as a teenager that I could grasp. And even now, I still think about many things, but I am so clear in my mind that something exists up there. We are here for a reason, and life exists even before birth, and I also believe in reincarnation. (Iveta, 1983)

Regarding descent lines, Iveta says:

In my opinion, it also plays a role in childbirth ... when women give birth very similarly, for example, a mother gives birth in the same way as the grandmother. It runs like a red thread connecting these similar births, and women don't know why. When something is left unhealed and they're carrying some weight from previous generations, it has an impact on a woman's life. I especially see that female line. I mean, I see a lot of things that are in me so subconsciously, from that feminine lineage of mine. When I saw that [on a training course for doulas], I just cried. As if I had things that were not healed, that I hadn't settled something and it was stretching all the way back to me in that family line of mine ... I see it as energy. I think something stays in the body on an energy level. I believe, for example, that those female diseases in chakra places recur a lot, so something sticks there. When I talk about that feminine line of mine, I mean that those women experienced something bad in the past, wars, for instance, and that energy is still there. (Iveta, 1983)

Ela (born in 1984) practices magic/witchcraft and attends Samuel's school of magic and seminars. She is also interested in Eastern spiritual teachings and leads her own course on spiritual mandalas. She perceives her deceased mother and two grandmothers as her "three closest ones", who teach her and advise her through visions. Her mother had schizophrenia during her lifetime and used to attack her daughter, but in Ela's visions, she is completely different. However, this pattern of behaviour seems to have been replicated in Ela's own daughter, who used to attack Ela without any reason. Ela explains this as follows:

I was doing automatic writing at the seminar, and there I contacted her [Ela's mother] and asked her for a message. I wrote it [her mother's message] and then my daughter read it. She cried and she said that those words touched her. So sometimes we recognise that transmission there, that fragment of a soul, or just a transference of energy across the family line. Because I feel like my daughter is a fragment of my mother ... It's not a complete reincarnation, but some of my mum's stuff just got transferred in there to communicate something and especially to break that family burden, the pattern of the mother and daughter hating each other, which has been passed down from my mother's side for several, several generations, so there's great animosity between mothers and daughters. ... I saw how my aunt treated my grandmother, and there the hatred was very great. Very cruel. The same way my aunt treated her daughter. There's an awful lot of hatred. ... Four years ago, I told my daughter that either we break it, or we do exactly the same. Well, she, by also having some skills, she said that we had to redo it. She wanted to fix it. We have tried and I hope that we can break it with my daughter. (Ela, 1984)

Thus, the universal energy in my interlocutors' accounts takes many forms – negative and positive, gendered, or ethnic. Yet all those forms of energy share a very important aspect – a moral dimension.

SPIRITUAL ENERGY AND MORAL ESSENTIALISM

People's stories reflect the idea that personal traits, types of behaviour, illnesses or other problems are transmitted within families through energy, due to moral issues in the lives of the deceased family members. For example, Teresa (born in 1961), who has recently begun practicing shamanism, communicates with her deceased family members every day through spiritual energy. In her visions of the Otherworld and her ancestors, she is often given a specific task related to her family – she must clean dirty pots. Each pot represents a family member, and the dirt symbolises either a moral issue requiring resolution or a curse that must be removed – a very good illustration of Mary Douglas' concept of dirt as a universal moral symbol (Douglas, 1966). Teresa sees herself as a “family cleaner” – this is her specific role in her family:

They [ancestors] give me pots to clean the “rod”. And I'm cleaning these pots, I'm still cleaning pots, I'm like in a canteen. And when that's done, when a pot is beautiful, clean, stainless steel, it's wrapped in foil and placed on the shelf ... I've been cleaning my family a lot, especially since my mum had some curses. Well, and then something from dad ... And they tell me specifically who I must cleanse. I must forgive them by feeling all the sadness, all the anger that they caused. (Teresa, 1961)

The idea of “moral inheritance” points to a specific form of essentialist thinking. Recent studies on essentialism have demonstrated that, in addition to previously examined domains such as ethnicity or gender, there is also a human tendency to view moral characteristics in essentialist terms; this tendency is supported by both cognitive development and social learning (Heiphetz, 2020). In the spiritual context, energy as a unifying essence of all human beings is principally conceived in moral terms because personal spiritual development should not only improve individual lives but must also contribute to the well-being of other people and society. My interlocutors thus spoke about individual responsibility in settling problems that were transmitted within the family from generation to generation.

For example, Kristina (born in 1963) regularly attends family constellation sessions but does not participate in other spiritual meetings. She is an ardent reader of spiritual literature and is deeply influenced by Buddhism and Confucianism. Her vision of previous generations is as follows:

“Rodové línie”, that's me and what's behind me. It's my mother, behind me is my grandmother, great-grandmother, and also my father ... That means

that everything that was in the family line comes together in me. When I turn around, I see an infinite pyramid with me at the top, and that's a tremendous strength and a tremendous support. For me, it's an opportunity to lean on the fact that this is how I must live, based on experience and responsibility. (Kristina, 1963)

Mira (born in 1973) attends some of Robert's seminars, but also other events, such as courses on family constellations, holotropic breathwork, and art therapy.⁷ She also regularly travels to Columbia to participate in ayahuasca sessions with indigenous shamans. These journeys have profoundly influenced her worldview and, in particular her perception of ancestors, as she has seen their importance for Native Indians. She explains:

I hadn't thought about my ancestors for a long time, and I started to think about how it relates to me when I saw this connection between ancestors, their descendants, and nature. It brought me to the constellations. I saw a big connection with everything there. I guess people don't think about that anymore – why a parent acted the way they did, why a grandparent had it the way they had it, how it affected them. And these constellations open it up quite a bit. Because there's probably a lot that can be worked out there too, I'm a big believer in pulling those lines. That's for sure. People really should do deeper work on themselves to figure out the causes of problems. Whether they're caused by ancestors, or by themselves. I believe in karma and that when a lineage is burdened with something, it continues until it stops. But I do believe that any person, when they focus on it, can cut through it when they work on it. And I also believe that when it is not fixed, it continues. (Mira, 1973)

All of these accounts emphasise personal responsibility for problems inherited from ancestors. This moral dimension is linked to teleological thinking, as lineage is seen as a purpose-driven force. Kristina's account is a very good illustration of this idea: a person is conceived as the “top of the pyramid” of family members, and the purpose of lineage is personal development:

They [ancestors] lived in that time; they lived based on what they had and created. And they did the best they could in that time, in that moment. If they had known differently, they would have acted differently. For example, in the lives that were before me, somebody was murdered. So that victim's energy is passed down, and I can live that victim's energy today, or vice versa, someone was a murderer, and I live that murderer's energy today.

⁷ Holotropic breathwork is a therapeutic technique developed by Stanislav Grof that uses controlled, rapid breathing and evocative music to induce altered states of consciousness. It aims to facilitate emotional healing, personal growth and self-awareness by accessing and processing unconscious material (Grof, 1988). Art therapy courses are based on the ideas of Carl Gustav Jung referring to active imagination (Swan-Foster, 2020).

And we need to acknowledge both this and that. Without them, we would not be here. We are living what they dreamed and what they created for us, and we can and shall improve our own lives and the lives of other people. (Kristina, 1963)

Such an understanding of the moral transgressions of ancestors is not universal: as empirical research has shown, patterns of moral judgment are shaped by culturally transmitted concepts (McNamara et al., 2018). In relation to the general category of the dead, they typically include the idea that transgressions of moral rules lead to forms of negotiation between the living and the dead, aimed at restoring moral order (e.g. Mencej, 2024; 2025). In the context of contemporary spirituality, moral judgements are influenced by the idea of individual spiritual development, which is supposed to contribute to the moral development of the universe.

The specific notion of self-spirituality is reflected in the emphasis on individual responsibility for one's actions. However, my interlocutors also stress the connection with ancestors and the importance of moral messages received from them. Thus, the concept of personhood here is both individualistic and collective, as the individual is seen as part of a "family tree" or a "pyramid" in which all generations are interconnected. This connection is not merely biological – as is the case in traditional kinship-based communities – it is a connection through spiritual energy that conducts moral issues.

CONCLUSION

In my interlocutors' accounts, lines of descent are linked to interactions with deceased family members through the notion of spiritual energy, in a way that is comparable to the connection between ancestors and a vital force in traditional societies. However, this connection is conceptualised differently. In small traditional communities studied by ethnographers, kinship was an essential part of social organisation; cultural ideas and practices related to ancestors asserted the legitimacy and continuity of descent groups, ensuring that descent lines persisted and that the social order was maintained. For my interlocutors, who are engaged in spiritual practices in a contemporary urban environment, interaction with ancestors fulfils the same general function as in traditional societies: it is supposed to maintain order through spiritual energy. This order, however, is not understood in terms of a person's position in the social structure defined by kinship, but rather in terms of their function in the universe where this person can occupy various positions. Thus, individual moral behaviour is crucial: messages from ancestors help descendants to correct their actions and to develop inner or spiritual abilities that contribute to the positive development of the world. Within this framework, lines of descent appear as conduits of certain types of behaviour that are transmitted from generation to generation. People who become aware of these aspects of descent lines are supposed either to interrupt or reinforce them. Remarkably, they can be described not only in terms of family traits but also as forms of spiritual inheritance.

In the context of contemporary spirituality, all persons – both the living and the dead – are understood to share the same essence: a universal spiritual energy. In terms of essentialism, this is the essence of “the self” that determines people’s behaviour. In my interlocutors’ accounts, this energy is “fragmented”: it can be expressed in many forms corresponding to positive and negative family traits, patterns of behaviour, and individual life trajectories. To conclude, the concept of lines of descent within alternative spirituality manifests an impact of ancestors on the lives of their descendants through the experience of spiritual energy, which causes concrete forms of behaviour determined by moral issues.

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STATEMENT ON RESEARCH DATA MANAGEMENT

The article is based on research data stored in the author’s personal archive, which will be deposited later this year in the Social Science Data Archives (ADP – Arhiv družboslovnih podatkov; <https://www.adp.fdv.uni-lj.si/en/>), where it will be accessible, to a limited extent, for scientific and research purposes only.

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RODOVNE LINIJE V ALTERNATIVNI DUHOVNOSTI: DOŽIVLJANJE DELOVANJA PREDNIKOV PREK DUHOVNE ENERGIJE

Antropološke študije so pokazale, da se je v tradicionalnih družbah delovanje prednikov kazalo skozi njihov trajni vpliv ali aktivno prisotnost v življenju živih, doseženo z različnimi kulturnimi praksami. V tem kontekstu imajo pomembno vlogo rodovne linije kot družbeno priznane genealoške povezave med predniki in potomci. Rod ni razumljen zgolj kot biološko poreklo, temveč kot prenos duhovnega bistva, življenjske sile ali moči prednikov, številne povezane kulturne prakse pa temeljijo na spremenjenih stanjih zavesti. Danes so se predniki kot

posebna kategorija mrtvih pojavili tudi v okviru alternativnih duhovnih gibanj, zlasti v neopoganstvu, ki si prizadeva oživiti religije prednikov, pa tudi v urbanem šamanizmu, ki črpa iz različnih tradicij, pri čemer poudarja prednike kot nosilce svetega ali duhovnega znanja. V teh duhovnih miljejih ima pomembno vlogo tudi povezava med pojmom duhovne energije in spremenjenimi stanji zavesti v individualnih in kolektivnih praksah.

V tem prispevku predstavljam rezultate etnografske raziskave, izvedene v Bratislavi, glavnem mestu Slovaške, med ljudmi, ki sledijo različnim duhovnim idejam in praksam, zlasti urbanemu šamanizmu in Wicci – naravno usmerjenemu neopoganskemu gibanju. Trdim, da na izkušnje ljudi glede delovanja prednikov vplivajo konkretna kulturna okolja, saj je njihova interpretacija odvisna od pojmovanja osebnosti oziroma sebstva, ki je kulturno specifično.

Posebno pojmovanje duhovnosti sebstva, značilno za alternativne duhovne tokove, odraža individualizem, prevladujoč v zahodnih družbah. V pripovedih mojih sogovornikov se to kaže v moralnem poudarku na individualni odgovornosti za lastna dejanja. Vendar pa sogovorniki poudarjajo tudi povezanost s predniki in pomen moralnih sporočil, prejetih od njih. Nastajajoče pojmovanje osebnosti je tako hkrati individualistično in kolektivno, pri čemer je posameznik razumljen kot del medsebojno povezane družine, ki obsega več generacij.

Pripovedi svojih sogovornikov interpretiram s pomočjo teorij, ki upoštevajo univerzalne lastnosti človeškega uma ter kulturno raznolikost in individualne izkušnje, pri čemer izhajam iz kognitivne teorije religije Pascala Boyerja (2001) in njene nadgradnje Emme Cohen in Justina Barretta (2011), ki poudarja osebnost kot osrednji element intuitivnega razmišljanja o človeškem delovanju. S tega vidika ideja, da se duhovna energija prenaša skozi rodovne linije, izhaja iz več prepletenih kognitivnih mehanizmov, vključno z zaznavanjem dejavnikov, intuitivnim dualizmom, teleološkim mišljenjem in psihološkim esencializmom. V svoji interpretaciji bom posebno pozornost namenila esencializmu, razumljenemu kot težnja k predpostavki, da člani določene kategorije – vključno z biološkimi vrstami in družinami – posedujejo neko temeljno, nespremenljivo bistvo, ki določa njihovo identiteto in lastnosti.

V tem duhovnem kontekstu je energija kot združujoče bistvo vseh ljudi razumljena predvsem v moralnem smislu, saj naj bi osebni duhovni razvoj ne izboljševal le posameznikovega življenja, temveč tudi prispeval k blaginji drugih ljudi in družbe kot celote. Povezave med družinskimi člani v pripovedih mojih sogovornikov tako presegajo biološko poreklo: razumljene so kot povezave, posredovane z duhovno energijo, ki prenaša moralna vprašanja. Zgodbe ljudi se nanašajo na idejo, da se osebnostne lastnosti, vzorci vedenja, bolezni ali druge težave dedujejo prek takšne energije zaradi moralnih vprašanj v življenju pokojnih družinskih članov. Ta ideja »moralnega dedovanja« kaže na specifično obliko esencialističnega mišljenja – moralni esencializem.

Sklepam, da ima za moje sogovornike, ki se ukvarjajo z duhovnimi praksami v sodobnem urbanem okolju, interakcija s predniki enako splošno funkcijo kot v

tradicionalnih družbah: vzdrževanje reda prek duhovne energije. Vendar ta red ni razumljen v smislu posameznikovega položaja v družbeni strukturi, določeni s sorodstvom, temveč v smislu posameznikove funkcije v vesolju, kjer lahko zaseda različne položaje. Individualno moralno vedenje je zato ključno: sporočila prednikov pomagajo potomcem popravljati svoja dejanja ter razvijati notranje ali duhovne sposobnosti, ki prispevajo k pozitivnemu razvoju sveta. V tem okviru rodovne linije delujejo kot kanali, po katerih se določeni vzorci vedenja prenašajo iz generacije v generacijo, ljudje, ki se teh vidikov rodovnih linij zavedo, pa naj bi jih bodisi prekinili bodisi okrepili. Tako pojem rodovnih linij v alternativni duhovnosti odraža vpliv prednikov na življenje njihovih potomcev skozi izkušnjo duhovne energije, ki se kaže v konkretnih oblikah vedenja, določenih z moralnimi vprašanji.

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