

Introduction – Rethinking the Agency of the Dead: Reasons, Triggers and Contexts

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This special issue of *Studia Mythologica Slavica* is the outcome of the second international interdisciplinary conference organised within the framework of the ERC project *The Roles of the Agency of the Dead in the Lives of Individuals in Contemporary Society* (DEAGENCY, No. 101095729; 2023–2028).¹ This project seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the roles that the dead play in the lives of individuals within contemporary Western societies, with particular emphasis on post-socialist countries. It builds on the premise, advanced by various scholars, that the distinction between life and death is neither fixed nor universally defined; rather, it is continuously negotiated through communication, collective and individual (religious) rituals, artefacts and various practices (Bloch, Parry, 1982; Metcalf, Huntington, 1991). The project and the articles in this special issue explore the notion that the dead are not merely objects of remembrance but are also regarded as actors whose agency arises within specific cultural, material, and social contexts and influences the lives of individuals in contemporary societies (Maddrell, 2013; Klass, Steffen, 2018; Walter, 2019). Members of the DEAGENCY project examine these questions across a range of social and cultural contexts, including rural communities in Central and Eastern Europe (Hesz, 2025; Kuntarič Zupanc, 2025; Mencej, 2025a; Uhrin, 2025), contemporary alternative spiritual movements (Bužeková, 2025; Ivnik, 2025) and research on mass graves in the countries of the former Yugoslavia (Hamer, 2025; Repič, 2025).

Two international conferences have so far been held as part of the DEAGENCY project. The primary focus of the first DEAGENCY conference in 2024 was on experiences with, and the conceptualisation of experiences with the dead,² resulting in two special issues.³

¹ <https://erc-deagency.eu/>

² <https://erc-deagency.eu/deagency-conferences/>

³ The post-conference special issues can be found in *Folklore: Electronic Journal of Folklore* 96, 2025, and *Anthropological Notebooks* 31 (2), 2025.

The second conference, in 2025, explored the various reasons, triggers, contexts and ways in which the dead influence the lives of the living;⁴ this special issue contains ten of the papers presented at this conference.⁵

The DEAGENCY project considers the dead as entities actively involved in the lives of the living and as actors within broader social and cultural processes (Mencej, 2025b). The authors in this special issue broadly adopt this perspective and examine the agency of the dead through diverse theoretical and methodological lenses. Exploring a wide range of cultural, social, historical and religious settings, the articles show us how the agency of the dead may manifest through objects and space, religious or spiritual experts, in dreams, art and popular culture.

While participants at the conference came from various disciplines – such as geography, history, sociology, thanatology, religious studies, bereavement studies and psychology – the papers in this special issue are mainly folkloristic and anthropological in their approach. The data and materials analysed in the articles were collected using various methodologies, including ethnographic fieldwork, large-scale surveys, textual and archival research, and discursive analysis of how the agency of the dead is represented in popular culture and artistic production. The contributions reflect a broad comparative scope, drawing on research and materials from Iceland, Japan, the United Kingdom, Finland, Lithuania, Slovenia, Hungary, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Slovakia.

As mentioned above, the authors in this special issue focus on situations in which the agency of the dead manifests and the circumstances under which it is experienced. They address this question from different perspectives, which is why the articles in the special issue are organised thematically. The first two papers focus on the material dimensions of interactions with the dead. In her paper, *Grave Goods and Dialectical Post-Death Agency in the Contemporary UK: Individual and Relational, Active and Passive, Past and Present*, **Jennifer Riley** examines the role of grave goods – clothing and objects left with the deceased and not easily retrievable by the living – in contemporary funerary practices in the United Kingdom. Based on ongoing research involving semi-structured interviews and a commissioned survey, which indicates that approximately 53% of contemporary funerals include grave goods, Riley identifies three dialectical tensions in post-death agency: individuality versus relationality, past versus present, and active versus passive. The study further emphasises how these objects are intertwined with the agency of the living, memory, and material and memorial objects, revealing the continuing significance of grave goods in contemporary funerary contexts.

Also focusing on materiality, **Simona Kuntarič Zupanc**'s paper, *Placemaking by the Dead: Cemeteries as Emotional, Moral and Ritual Places*, explores cemeteries and the spatial dimensions of continuing bonds with the dead. Based on nine months of anthropological fieldwork in north-eastern Slovenia, Kuntarič Zupanc investigates various

⁴ Tina Ivnik and Petra Hamer, eds., *The Agency of the Dead in the Lives of Individuals: Experience and Conceptualisation: DEAGENCY International Conference: Book of Abstracts*, Ljubljana: Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology, Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana, 2024.

⁵ In addition to this special issue, other conference papers were published in a special issue of the journal *Český lid / Czech Ethnological Journal*, <https://ceskylid.avcr.cz/cz/archives/113-1>.

practices of care and ritual intervention at graves, showing how the dead and the living co-produce these cemeteries as ambivalent spaces imbued with emotional and moral significance.

The next two articles draw on folklore archive materials to investigate changes in the relationship between the living and the dead, a topic also addressed by other articles in this issue. In *The Revenge of the Rejected – The Rise, Fall and Background Context of Icelandic Beliefs in Supernatural Family Followers*, **Terry Gunnell** investigates the Icelandic phenomenon of spirits attached to families, commonly known as “mórar” (peat-reds, male) and “skottur” (tasselled hats, female), using previously collected folkloristic materials and databases. Unlike spirits associated with buildings, these family-bound entities are often believed to arise from social rejection or the mistreatment of the poor, affecting successive generations. Gunnell provides an overview of the nature, distribution and apparent uniqueness of these legends, and explores why such beliefs are diminishing, though not entirely disappearing, in contemporary Icelandic society.

Dreams of the dead are perhaps the most common way in which the agency of the dead is manifested. However, individuals report various kinds of dreams of the dead, which are also interpreted differently, depending on broader cultural as well as individual understandings. As in the previous paper, the following contribution focuses on changes in traditional ideas and how they are disappearing or being reinterpreted in the contemporary world. In her paper, *Agency of the Dead in Dream Narratives: From Traditional Culture to (Post)modern Perspectives*, **Lina Būgienė** explores how understandings of dream narratives have changed over time. Analysing folklore material, she demonstrates that in traditional Lithuanian culture, the deceased who appeared in dreams usually did so to request something from the living, often to improve their condition in the afterlife. However, interpretations of dreams involving the dead have shifted in (post)modern times. In more contemporary folklore material, she concludes that such dreams are now more often understood in relation to the dreamer and their personal problems.

Kaarina Koski’s article also looks at dream encounters with the dead, but from the perspective of problematic family relationships. In her paper, *Deceased Parent in Distressing Dreams: Dealing with Problems in Bereavement Narratives*, she analyses the nightmarish dream narratives of three Finnish women involving their deceased parents and argues that, rather than indicating difficulties in coping with grief and loss, these dreams were the products of strained relationships. By reading these texts closely, she shows how the act of recounting such dream experiences enables the dreamers to transform their daughter-parent relationships into forms with which they feel more at ease.

The topic of family relationships continues in the next section of the special issue, which examines the role of the dead among individuals and groups involved in contemporary spirituality. As in the previous paper, **Tina Ivnik** examines how problematic relationships with deceased individuals who led immoral lives – usually family members – are reflected in encounters between the living and the dead. In her paper “Growth” vs. “Stuckness”: *Morality, the Afterlife and the Influence of the Deceased on the Living*, she examines these experiences in the context of afterlife conceptions amongst adherents of alternative spirituality in Bosnia and Herzegovina. She shows how moral frameworks shape ideas of

reincarnation, distinguishing between souls who continue to grow spiritually after death and act as positive influences on the living, and the “stuck dead” who require spiritual support and may exert a negative influence. Ivnik also underscores the contrast between alternative spiritualist understandings of the relationship with the dead and the region’s official religious and vernacular traditions.

Understood more broadly, questions of family and ancestors are also the subject matter of **Tatiana Bužeková’s** paper, *Lines of Descent in Alternative Spirituality: Experiencing the Agency of Ancestors through Spiritual Energy*. In this contribution, Bužeková examines how ancestors are understood as active agents in contemporary spiritual life, combining anthropological theory with ethnographic research among practitioners of urban shamanism and Wicca in Bratislava. It builds on earlier debates that frame ancestors as socially efficacious beings linked to descent, ritual and spiritual power, while emphasising that descent involves not only biological lineage but also the transmission of spiritual energy accessed through altered states of consciousness. Situating these ideas within the post-socialist growth of alternative spiritual movements in Europe, the study argues that experiences of ancestral agency are shaped by culturally specific notions of personhood: in urban spiritual milieus, descent mediates connections between the living and the dead through spiritual energy, while a strong emphasis on individual development reframes ancestral agency in morally essentialist terms.

The next paper, while still primarily examining bonds with deceased family members, shifts the focus to communication with the dead through mediums. In her article, *Why People Go to Mediums: Contexts, Motivations and Embodied Experience in Contemporary Hungary*, **Emese Ilyefalvi** provides an overview of a particular spiritualist technique – the use of a three-legged stool to convey messages from the dead – and examines the Hungarian clientele of its practitioners. Based on participant observation and both online and offline interviews with seers and their clients, she explores the motivations that lead people to consult seers after the death of loved ones. She argues that, besides being the conduit for messages between the living and the dead, the significance of this interactive technique lies in its capacity to provide an embodied, experiential sense of continuing bonds with the deceased.

The issue concludes with an examination of how the agency of the dead is experienced through art and popular culture across changing historical and social contexts. **Tomaž Simetinger** examines changes in spiritualist practices by looking closely at the process of creating artworks – specifically paintings – in collaboration with the dead. In his article, *Painting as Communication with the Deceased and Other Non-Human Beings*, he compares the creative practices of three different artists: two well-known historical figures in spiritualist painting, Georgiana Houghton and Hilma af Klint, and a contemporary Slovenian artist with whom he conducted interviews and used the method of participant observation to explore her mode of work. Using the theoretical framework of vernacular religion, he examines both the similarities and differences in their approaches to painting with the help of the dead. He concludes that the main difference lies in the hierarchical model of revelation and the subordination of the artist’s body in

historical cases, as opposed to the more relational and dialogical form of collaboration he found in his interlocutor's experience.

Aljaž Mesner's paper, *Modern-Day Kaidan: Japanese Horror Storytelling as Popular Culture*, also examines various forms of art and popular culture, focusing on *kaidan* (ghost stories) in both historical and contemporary contexts from a comparative approach. He traces the evolution of the Japanese horror storytelling tradition from its first widespread popularity in the Edo period, through the scepticism of the Meiji era, to its adaptation in 20th-century film and television. The paper pays particular attention to the 1990s, when *kaidan* entered the mainstream via J-Horror, television programmes, books and magazines, encouraging firsthand engagement with haunted locations. Mesner also highlights the recent resurgence of oral storytelling through competitions, live performances and themed bars, drawing on media analysis, field observations and interviews to explore these contemporary developments.

We hope readers will find this special issue both stimulating and rewarding, and that the articles prove to be enriching and insightful.

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