

**Thesis of the PhD dissertation**

**FUNERAL AND MOURNING CUSTOMS AND TRADITIONS IN CERNAT  
AND ITS SURROUNDINGS**

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## 1. The topic and the purposes of the dissertation

The focus of my paper, *Funeral and mourning customs and traditions in Cernat and its surroundings*, is to present the habits and emotional manifestations of the inhabitants of my native village towards death and passing. My dissertation is monographic. I seek to explore the attitude towards death and its rites not only in Cernat, but also in Kezdi- and Orbaiszek. In doing so, the phenomena, drawn in parallel by similarities and differences, bring forth deeper points of interpretation.

Cernat and its surrounding strata form a reformed region. Studying matters concerning the funeral and mourning customs by presenting the habits gives insight in the social and economical background of the inhabitants, in their attitudes towards the church and religion, and in their ethnical relations.

There has not been done a major ethnographic work on the funeral and mourning customs of the strata in Haromszek. My paper aims to compensate this hiatus.

## 2. Applied methods

My research undertakes the presentation of funeral and mourning customs of the above mentioned settlements. I present a scenario of habits based on monitoring. In here I seek to follow the principle of linear presentation of ethnographic studies. The taxonomic and theoretical background of Van Gennep's classification is also present in the paper. I make use of it and quote from it at the beginning of my research and during the collection. During the presentation of the socio-ethnographic background of the relations between the family and the community when losing someone, I put to the front certain secondary topics, thus I intentionally interrupt the linear depiction of the custom. During the presentation of the dissection of the events I make use of the principle of "consistent description"(Clifford Geertz), a principle based on monitoring used in cultural anthropology.

I follow the course of the individual's loss and mourning within the community with a thanatological knowledge. I put to the front the manifestation of the *loss* and *mourning* in the community. These show the way in which the community and the collective conventions have an effect on the mourning individual ("*Rites Help...*" *Psychological opinions about death*).

I undertake the scripts related to human rites of passage using the points of view of the textual folklore. I follow the structural text interpretation of the analysis of wills. When analyzing the obituary leaflets I study the creation of metaphors going back to a century.

The collection period and the research of the habitually used text types mark the creation of a historical outlook on the facts. The heritage of past times, still alive in the memories of the informants, and the ethos of the ancient scripts reflect the changes that the habits and customs have undergone. In these changes, even if they get simplified, one can find the persistence of certain elements that were believed to be forgotten, yet, they are being renewed and tend to appear in a new context.

Besides presenting the collective – mass manifestation of the customs, I also refer to individual manifestations, which in spite of having a deviant and specific nature, influence and create collective behavioural and manifestation forms.

The study of thanatological dissection of the events shows that this kind of analysis emerges the individual from the community, emphasizing his/her loss and focusing on the specific problems he/she had. By revealing these problems the relationship he/she had with the surroundings and community are mapped.

### 3. Results of the dissertation

The structure of my paper consists of the following units: *Introduction, A general outlook on research work, "Rites Help..." (Psychological opinions about death), A draft on cultural history of the village, The reaction and feelings of the elderly towards passing, The presentation of funeral rituals, Differences in funeral services and ceremonies, The Romanian orthodox funeral habits in Cernat and its surroundings, The way gypsies react to death, Death announcements and obituary leaflets, Cemeteries and symbols on tombstones, Last wills*

As the order of the units shows, I have tried to present the reaction of the village's inhabitants towards death and passing at different levels and manifestation forms.

The introductory unit, *The reaction and feelings of the elderly towards passing*, prepares the presentation of the reaction of the inhabitants to death and death customs. It is an open structured text because the phenomena presented in this part stay as reference points for other units and chapters.

I present the concept of the elderly about death by presenting and referring to their behavior and attitude towards their ancestors. After the political change of 1989 lands were given back to ex-landlords. Therefore, in the analysis I made an attempt to reflect how this

fact affected the coexistence of different generations. It also includes how the concept of death is reflected by people who are getting on.

Church commencement ceremonies face ageing people with the increased number of death in his /her generation; this fact may strengthen and deepen their fear of death.

In the unit which presents *death rituals* I do not refer to the customs in separate subunits. I have made up large coherent units which do not form rigid limits.

Subunits: *Dreams and beliefs, Human condition and state before death, From death to the funeral, The funeral, The last supper in memory of the dead and mourning.*

The classification and delimitation of the elements of customs in larger units signals similarities with the van Gennep-type of classification.

In this structure-based social - ethnical presentation of the individual, his/her relationship with the surroundings and environment gains main importance.

In the subunit *Dreams and beliefs*, after the presentation of death predicting beliefs and death motifs I have presented and analyzed a few dream-related narrations.

I have continuously tried to make out how a collectively known element and individual motifs influence and affect the mourning of the person who suffers from the loss. In the “dream visions” the dead person appears in a closed, limited structure and his /her individual motifs are delimited, too.

In the section *Human condition and state before death* I refer to those customs and manifestations which make the incurable sick people aware of their death. Ordinary, everyday life behavioural forms and gestures reveal not only individual behavioural patterns, but also behavioural types which have been learnt from ancestors. Hence the collocation *good death* made me analyze all those customs and manifestations which exist in the dying person`s surroundings and environment.

*Visiting the sick* has an important role for the dying person and his relatives. Visits are forms of farewell but they may also refer to symbolically tightening emotional bounds with the family of the dying person. This sequence includes the double oriented customs, on one hand it refers to the dying person but on the other hand they maintain social interaction and structures. The analysis focuses on the inner call which urges people to visit dying person. The emotional reaction of the visitor towards the sick. The supervising nature the family members. The transmission of the experience of the visit, and observing the process of dying as an outsider.

Rural people react to such situations with a strong community bound and feeling, and therefore they are active participants of the happenings even if they do not belong to the family.

At the phase of *death's door* relatives focus on the *corps*. It starts with the hospital leaving phase and with the official diagnosis. Releasing the dying person from hospital has the purpose of putting him/her back in the homely surroundings and avoiding corpse dissection and it also makes easier for the bereaved to accept death and the loss.

The subunit *From death to funeral* refers to *corps* clothing and display in public.

I have presented how an experienced person can be involved to perform this ritual and how the family member who hands over this moral obligation and duty to a stranger is adjudged.

Displaying the corpse in public has a psychological role and impact. Beliefs strengthen the psychological need of this ritual, but people tend to refuse to accept the image of the displayed corpse. This reflects the people's changing attitude towards the concept of death.

The period between the death announcement and the funeral follows a linear sequence of events. On one hand it focuses on the *corps*, but on the other hand it "deals with" the social aspects involved in this ritual and manifestation.

The bereaved are absolved from obligations and duties. This passive state enables them to reflect on the farewell. At the time of the vigil the exposed feelings and grief can lead the bereaved to catharsis. People who take part in the event supervise the family members and speak about the habits and character of the dead person. They also state their opinions about the vigil itself.

I continuously refer to those elements which signal the changed and simplified nature of customs and the birth of new rituals.

I talk about the usage of funeral parlours that are being built in the villages and town of Kezdiszek, and their effect on funeral customs. There hasn't been a funeral parlour in the reformed region of Cernat, so the funeral customs can still be called traditional. In most of the catholic regions there is one, and ministers had a lot to do with people accepting them. These funeral parlours that are being built are changing the funeral customs essentially.

In the unit *The funeral* a major topic consists of the family manifestations, and self-reflections in community (Victor Turner). The symbolic use of space urges people to follow certain behavioural forms. The elements of this custom are presented in a chronological order.

A more detailed description refers to a new form of donation and homage which has become a built-in phase of church service: the amount of money given for wreath. This custom has nothing to do with the transcendental aspect of the dead, but tightens the emotional bond of the community under the auspices of church and clergy.

In the unit *The last supper in memory of the dead* I analyze those aspects of this custom which have changed. Since it often reflects social status and social interaction it is an important sequence, and it can have an evaluating role of the social interaction the dead person's family has had. The space marked for the last supper and the menu can be landmarks of the family status, too. The change in the menu of the last supper does not only show simplification, but also tendencies to bring in something new. Preparing a food is a challenge for the members of the family only when it is not present in the everyday menu. Take for example the *sandwich*; it was an affliction for the villagers to purchase the material for the sandwich, due to the fact that they were in short supply before the change of the regime.

Last supper attendance refusal can be a signal for the family to reevaluate their relationship with the people of the community.

Mourning is symbolized by the black clothes women wear. Their black clothes symbolize the loss in their husband's family, too. The black clothes of the men are fashionable and "town-like". Black clothes worn by family members during the mourning period generally raises the people's appreciation and respect.

A subchapter of the unit *Differences in funeral services and ceremonies* reflects on how reformed and catholic funeral ceremonies are alike or different. Putting candles on the graves on November 1<sup>st</sup> and commemorating the dead during clerical ceremonies shows the influence of catholic religion. On the other hand, catholic people living in reformed regions tend to change or leave out elements from their original funeral ceremonies, like using the church during funerals. They tend to give money to the family when not bringing a girdle to the funeral instead of giving it in the church.

The ritual of the confession is an entirely catholic custom, just like keeping away the dead that might return, thus lighting sacred candles, arranging the hands of the dead and its symbolical meaning.

The peculiarities of the reformed religion are paralleled with the funeral customs of villages showing manifestations of strong catholic identity.

In this unit I also undertake the influence of the communist era on funeral services. Furthermore, I present the symbolical meaning of a funeral when an urn is used instead of a coffin.

The subchapter *The funeral of Communists and people belonging to certain sects* brings forth funeral manifestations, customs that deviate from the norm.

At the time of the foundation of the communist era the members of a family rejected the ecclesiastical ceremony. These services were replaced by funeral ceremonies in which the symbols of the verbal and visual communist political ideology were included, on the analogy of the parochial one. The dismissive behavior of the milieu leads to the disintegration of the coherence in the family.

The funerals of people who are not buried according to church ceremony were timed at noon so that the sound of church bell dispel the tension caused by the lack of clergy.

*The orthodox funeral customs of Romanian people living in Cernat and its vicinities* presents the habits and customs of Romanian people, their ethnical identity. Romanians have been inhabiting this area over the last century. In 1941 most of them made their names Hungarian-like, they became reformed and left their own graveyard. Their funerals take place in the church, and their rites were either simplified or simply left out (eg. boiled corn, sepulchral bough).

I depict the graveyards and the funeral customs of Romanian people living in the vicinities. I present the strong religious and ethnical identity that is present in the funeral customs of Romanian people and still exists in the native village of a Romanian family that is now living in Cernat.

In the section *The way gypsies react to death*, I have presented the death customs of the gypsy inhabitants. A separate unit deals with this issue and presents that the collective elements of their ethnicity influences and separates them from the customs of the other inhabitants. Thus understanding them requires points of view that are different from the above mentioned.

As a starting point I have referred to their death customs which stir their community. I also referred to their relationship with church and clergy and in this context I have analyzed the role of *curse*.

By attending gipsy funeral ceremonies I learnt about their reaction towards death, corpse and mortuary and the symbolic meaning of these. I have systematically arranged the death related beliefs. They generally include references to splitting up the relationship between the dead person and the living.

In most cases the concept of death is accompanied by a strong fear. The eliminative rituals come to weaken this aspect. The house of the dead gipsy gives the impression of untidiness. Therefore, the period of time between mortal agony and funeral is considered a period of fast. A more profound analysis of the custom leads to a typical concept and image of the transcendental which is revealed by specific rituals and oral communication forms. A new meaning of gift giving *money for the last journey* is compulsory (the corpse is covered with money). Poorer gipsy families are exempted from this custom and they can use the money for buying alcohol. The image and concept of the transcendental appears in the ritual.

During a gipsy funeral social interaction plays an important role. The space structure of the funeral is rather chaotic without any specific order of the events. Rowdiness during funerals is quite common and this has its symbolic value with a rather “connotative meaning”

Church service is an element of the structural form but it does not have any “subject matter message”. After the funeral service they play musical instruments on the graveside. I consider that this is a way of symbolically connecting the dead to each other.

I have analyzed the role of gipsy musicians, whom they tend to put on the second place next to the members of an official band.

The first part of the mourning imposes strict rules, but the second part is shorter with a fast course of events.

*Death announcements and obituary leaflets*, a text analysis section, refers to the content and subject matter of the announcements and obituary leaflets. These often reflect a socio-cultural viewpoint and have a stereotypical use of language functions which reflect man`s outlook on life and the world in general. Their historical analysis reveals the change of their functionality. It appears as an initiative of the landlords and it had the role of announcement. In rural areas it represents an expression of social status, and their delivery reflects how the immediate and distant family members are related to each other.

Between 1920 – 1940 announcements became popular with the middle class (intellectuals, clerks, scribes). Their content reveals that the loss affects not only the family members but the society in general because the person served not only his/her family but also the community. The great loss is emphasized by the use of quotations from the bible.

During the first World War the announcements, which often had national and religious character, were printed in the memory of the soldiers who died on the battlefield. The content of the announcements included references to the heroism of the soldier, too.

As soon as the announcements spread out and became popular with each social category their content also included facts about the dead person`s *home and family life* and they often reveal



facts about the memory of a woman or of a man working on the farm. The content of the announcements generally referred to an ideal way of life. These items have an intense religious aspect and references to good human characteristics prevail: love, kindness, warm-heartedness, open-handedness and self-sacrifice.

In the period of collectivism, the announcement became very fashionable and the most frequent word and element used in the texts was *work*, and the word phrase *love for work* was associated with the idea of love for family and family members. This motif also reveals that the community was getting smaller and smaller, and by time it referred only to family. This image portrays the stereotypical figure of a man who devotes his/her life to the loved ones. From now on every person attending the funeral gets an obituary leaflet.

Starting from the 1990s`the text and content of the death announcements and obituary leaflets has been getting shorter. They have fewer motifs and there are no biblical quotations on them. The content generally refers to the memory of the dead person.

In the subunit *Death announcements and throwaways as devices for self-reflection* I have analyzed texts with unusual content and functional forms in the context of lifestyles.

The analysis of the content of the obituary leaflet refers to how its editor would have liked to live his/her life if he/she had had the chance to live it again, especially in case the good reputation of the family was destroyed.

In the unit *Graveyards and symbols on headstones* I have referred to the funeral culture of the village and to the origins and development of the custom of setting up headstones.

In the analysis of the space structure of the cemeteries I refer to the ethnical, religious and social boundaries. In the public cemetery that was opened at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the centre and the periphery were delimited. This marks the renewal of a medieval type of burying model. This new cemetery caused changes in the social and religious structure of the cemeteries. The catholic cemetery was deserted and it became the cemetery of the poor.

The cemetery of newcomers and other ethnical groups was delimited on the periphery. This symbolical space structuring is present in the nearby settlements, too (for e.g., there is a cemetery for the hanged, a part of the cemetery that belongs to the gypsies).

In the research of symbols of headstones I analyzed how they changed and influenced, and later reflected the change in the outlook of cemeteries.

By analyzing registers which refer to collectively set up headstones I point out the relationship between the sanctum (the sacred sphere of the graveyard) and its role in preserving national identity. In defining cults about famous people of the nation, the local

intellectuals create a ritual in which they include the inhabitants of the village. Later the cemetery is considered a place for the memorial ceremonies.

Besides depicting the headstones I also mention families who were stone-masons from generation to generation (Poian and Sanzieni) as well as the masons making headstones from artificial stone in the present (Cernat and Hilib).

When presenting the *crosses* I delineate the stock of crosses that seem standardized and their strong space-sanctifying meaning. In Cernat this symbol of catholic identity was put in the square of the church instead of public squares.

Some of the symbols of the simple headstones (the so-called *kopjafa*) are to be found on the ancient headstones. In the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the headstones gain a new look which bear a folk art- kind of model. With the help of the Village Museum in Cernat an exclusive and elaborated “motif-frame” appears, which portrays age and social codes.

With the appearance of *specialists* this headstone bears the connotations of folk art.

In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century it got a new role .At present it has an institutionalized background. Therefore, it uses a well-defined motif structure which refers to age and social codes. They can also be considered as masterpieces of traditional craftsmanship.

I compare the ancient stock of headstones of the reformed graveyards of Kezdi- and Orbaiszek, and their symbols. The headstones of Kezdiszek can be characterized by an anthropomorphic nature (Albis, Cernat, Dalnic), whereas the ancient headstones of Orbaiszek gain a typical “knob-style” (Covasna, Papauti). Headstones that are considered to be folk art are national symbols, and with their connotations they are much more “in fashion” than the older ones.

I aim to present the stock of headstones in Kezdiszek. I analyze the effect of the symbols existing on them on other headstones, as well as the symbolic tokens formed with other works of folk art.

The new types of graves covered with a bed of concrete show new type of funeral custom.

In the analysis of the development of *vaults and charnel houses* I emphasized the restructuring and reevaluating nature of a social process. During my research I have noticed that at the time of the loss of private properties the odium of the vaults were common (for e.g. in Marcusa and Zabala).

With the delineation of the vaults in Kezdiszek I point out the existence of families who played an important role in the rise of the bourgeoisie.

I point out how they used the cemetery, the way they looked after the graveyard, the role of the church in it, and the disappearance of rules that said that other denominations could not bury their dead in that area.

I also refer to the flora and the way they used to look after it. I depict a job done by women that was specialized in producing a flower (the *pansy*).

The *Last Will* unit deals with the presentation of the local characteristics of the laws governing individual property and the social changes which influenced the constitutional right.

In the 17 -18<sup>th</sup> century only the aristocracy had written form of last wills. The poor had oral forms. Nowadays both oral and written forms exist because, quite often, family members have an agreement on heritage.

Starting from the 19<sup>th</sup> century the written form of the last wills was spread among the lower social categories, too. In rural communities the last will was not officialized by local authorities, it was a private document. Hence its creation scheme was easier. This enabled more transparency in monitoring the population to obey the rules of the last will. It had the role of maintaining peaceful relationship among family members. In spite of this the conflicts provoked by them were quite frequent.

By the text analysis of last wills I also bring into relief that they were considered important if their author considered that the relationship among family members are bad or he/she does not feel their affection or respect towards him/her.

In some cases I also track what happened after reading the will. Getting an enclosure can create specific situations, because an old document has become important again, thus it often changes relationships between the family members.

I set out the position of the disinherited ones, their attitudes and behavior are mentioned in several units.

Making a will requires a bit more archaic language than the everyday used one; the uniformity of the language suggests that the will of the dead is for ever. In contrast to this, the obituary leaflet is for the public, thus it takes effect with its novelty.

From socio-ethnical point of view, my paper focuses on the presentation of the individual and his/her relationship with the surroundings and environment. By making an attempt to reflect the customs and traditions which exist in people`s minds and character.

I have tried to find the answer to Man`s role and place in the universe and his attempt to self-portraying in his relationship with the others.

#### 4. Publications

*“Whatever people say”*...In. Changing society, ed. Borbely-Czegenyi, KJNT, Cluj, 1999, pp. 176-179.

*Gypsy funeral*, In. Korunk, 9, 1999, pp. 107-112.

*Plant symbols in the customs of the Romanians from Zabala*. In. Muvelodes, Cluj, 2000/5, pp. 23-25.

*Cemeteries and symbols on tombs in Cernat*, In. Unnepsi kotet Farago Jozsef...editor Ujvari Zoltan, Budapest, 2002, pp. 136-139.

*Death announcements and obituary leaflets in Cernat*, Ethnica, editor Ujvari Zoltan, Debrecen, 2002, pp. 136-139.

*Last wills in Cernat*. In. Nepi kultura, tarsadalom Haromszeken. Ed. Dimeny –Szabo, KJNT, Cluj, 2003, 154-157.

*Gypsy funeral in Cernat*. In. Kistukor, 2005, XI. Cluj, 24-27.

Ready for publishing:

*Ethnical boundaries in the death customs of the gypsies*. Szekelyfold , Miercurea Ciuc.