

Article

The Dead in Vernacular Magic Practices among Bosniaks

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Abstract: Based on fieldwork research among the Bosniak (Muslim) population in rural areas of Bosnia and Herzegovina, this article starts with the technique of summoning the dead, aimed at obtaining information about missing goods. It argues that the practice of summoning the dead, like practices aimed at magically harming others, is based on the same moral rules that govern everyday relations between the living and the dead. While these rules are generally followed and observed in everyday life, they can also be deliberately inverted to one's own advantage or to the disadvantage of others. Ultimately, I argue that the dead prove to be moral agents who act when moral norms are violated.

Keywords: the dead; agency; morality; summoning the dead; necromancy; magic; soil; Bosnia and Herzegovina

1. Introduction

In the winter of 2016, I visited a small village in central Bosnia for the first time to conduct field research on vernacular notions about the dead among the local Bosniak¹ (Bosnian Muslim) population. While I was told many stories about ghosts that appeared to people in dreams, tormented them on their way home through the forest in the middle of the night, or in their own homes, and about the various misfortunes that they can cause (all of which I had also heard in various variants in other villages where I had previously conducted fieldwork), I was surprised to hear narratives about people who deliberately conjured the dead to obtain the information they were looking for—something I had not come across in my previous fieldwork.

The practice of summoning the dead, and more specifically of necromancy (from *necros*, meaning “dead”, and *manteia*, meaning “divination”—Morton 2020, p. 20; cf. Graf [1994] 2002, pp. 199–200), i.e., the practice of bringing corpses back to life or summoning the souls (spirits) of the dead (Jolly 2002, p. 59; Bourguignon 2005, p. 6451; Venhorst 2013, p. 274), is primarily a form of divination aimed at obtaining answers from the dead, who are believed to possess knowledge beyond that of the living. Accounts of this practice date back to the earliest historical and literary sources (Gordon 1999, pp. 206–9, 228–29; Thomsen 2001, pp. 86–88; Graf [1994] 2002, pp. 57–58, 82, 190–200; Jolly 2002, pp. 58–66; Davies 2007, pp. 65, 69; Morton 2020; Davies 2023), continuing throughout the Middle Ages and into the early modern period and, according to some scholars, can be recognized, although in a slightly different form, also in late 19th and early 20th century spiritualist and spiritist séances. In its modern versions, the invocation of the dead remains a cultural practice, particularly among younger people, in contemporary Western societies (cf. Morton 2020, p. 16).

While the practice of summoning the dead was also recorded in European vernacular traditions,² i.e., outside the tradition of learned magic of educated professionals, necromancy does not seem to have been frequently recorded in the vernacular culture in the Balkans,³ or even in Bosnia and Herzegovina (however, see Lilek 1894, p. 633; 1896, p. 461; 1900, p. 204).⁴ Like Christianity,⁵ Islam, which has had a considerable influence on the way of life of Bosniaks, i.e., Bosnian Muslims in Bosnia and Herzegovina, also considered deliberate communication with the dead to be a dubious practice (see Davis 2007, pp.



Citation: Mencej, Mirjam. 2024. The Dead in Vernacular Magic Practices among Bosniaks. *Religions* 15: 605. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15050605>

Academic Editors: Martin Hoondert and Katharine Olson

Received: 12 December 2023

Revised: 10 May 2024

Accepted: 12 May 2024

Published: 14 May 2024



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4–5; [Walter 2019](#), pp. 24–25; [2017](#)). In the 17th century Ottoman Empire, the puritanical, religious-reformist Kadizadeli movement strictly rejected this practice, and an early eighteenth-century *fetva* attests to the punishment of individuals who claimed to have made contact with the dead in cemeteries ([Sariyannis 2013](#), pp. 211–12). In fact, Islam generally prohibits communication with the dead and does not provide for the “return” of the dead, either in spirit or in a body ([Idleman Smith and Yazbeck Haddad \[1981\] 2002](#), p. 50; [Sariyannis 2013](#), pp. 210, 213).

In contrast to official Islam, however, stories about the dead appearing as ghosts (in the emic term: *prikaze*, *ukaze* (literally “apparitions”)), and magic practices related to the dead, are not uncommon in vernacular Islam. As Islam was only introduced to the population of what is now Bosnia and Herzegovina relatively late, in the 15th century, this provided scope for its syncretism with Slavic pagan ideas and practices and with vernacular Christianity. In addition, Sunni Islam of the Hanafi school of jurisprudence, to which the Bosnian Muslims belong, is the most open school of thought within Islam, and the influence of Sufi mysticism in central Bosnia ([Bringa 1995](#), p. 174) means that the vernacular ideas and forms of religiosity in the region of my field research do not always fully correspond to the teachings of official Islam.

This paper is based on the field research I conducted among the Bosniak population in the rural areas of Central Bosnia for two months in 2016 and 2024. I conducted a total of 110 semi-structured interviews with Bosniak interviewees living in the region, with core questions centered around notions, experiences and practices related to the dead. Due to the migration of the young population to other countries and to cities for work, I mainly had access to older people; as a woman, I had easier access to female interviewees, so interviews with female interlocutors slightly predominate. Stemming from the three narratives of necromantic practices that I recorded, in this paper I will discuss the principles on which this practice, which aims to obtain information from the dead, is based. I will argue that the necromantic practice discussed in the few recorded accounts is not necessary a remnant of an ancient tradition of learned magic passed down in educated circles of magic experts (see [Láng](#), this volume). Rather, I will demonstrate that this, as well as other types of magic, understood here broadly as pertaining to human control of “supernatural” sources ([Davies 2012](#), p. 1), are based on intermingled vernacular ideas: that the dead have agency; that the agency of the dead manifests itself when moral norms are transgressed; and that individuals may deliberately violate moral norms precisely because they expect the dead to manifest their agency in this way. Thus, while the aim of the article is neither an in-depth analysis nor a theoretical discussion of particular magic practices, it demonstrates that magic practices that are based on communication with the dead rely upon the same norms of proper behavior towards the dead that people generally adhere to in daily life, but are inverted within the realm of magic and manipulated to one’s own benefit or to the detriment of others.

2. The Agency of the Dead

Even if the idea that the dead have agency is perhaps counterintuitive in today’s Western society, historical studies show that in medieval and early modern Europe, the living were closely interwoven with the dead. They were understood as a distinct social (age) group to which the same rules applied as to the living, and communication between the living and the dead, established through dreams, rituals, gifts, and other forms of exchange, had a significant impact on people’s lives ([Oexle 1983](#); [Geary 1994](#); [Marshall 2002](#); [Nyce et al. 2015](#)). In contrast to pre-modern European societies, the dominant Western ontology today no longer accepts that the dead have agency in the lives of the living. The new understandings brought about by the Enlightenment meant that “ghosts” were stripped of their worldly existence. They became psychological entities and were eventually relegated to the inner realm of the mind, understood as productions of the mind and imagination ([Richardson 2003](#); [Stark 2006](#), p. 378; [Davis 2007](#), pp. 6–7) and explained

(away) as hallucinations or illusions, psychophysiological disorders, mental illnesses or pathological conditions (see [Honko 1962](#); [Ward 1976](#)).

Nevertheless, the ontological order involving ongoing communication and exchange between the living and the dead has persisted in many close-knit European communities well into the 20th century, and continues in some more remote contexts into the 21st century (see, e.g., [Cátedra \[1988\] 1992](#); [Kenna 1976, 1991](#); [Hesz 2012](#)). Moreover, it seems that continued communication between the living and the dead need not be confined to the margins of contemporary society. Perhaps their continued existence simply goes unrecognized “because its domain of existence has changed from the natural to the symbolic” ([Kwon 2008](#), p. 16), or perhaps people simply lack the discourse to articulate their experiences ([Raahauge 2016](#)). Indeed, since the late 1980s, scholars of bereavement studies have recognized the importance that the agency of the dead plays in the lives of survivors. They argue that for some bereaved people, maintaining relationships with their significant others in a transformed mode has proved to be meaningful and adaptive ([Klass et al. 1996](#), p. xviii; [Silverman and Klass 1996](#), pp. 14–15, 22; [Goss and Klass 2005](#), pp. 3–5; [Stroebe and Schut 2005](#); [Keen et al. 2013](#)). In the USA in particular, so-called “after-death communication”, usually understood as a “medicalized ghost encounter”, a postmodern version of “bereavement hallucinations”, which in the past were understood as an undesirable symptom of grief, but today are understood as a remedy for grief, has been gaining popularity since the 1990s ([Kwilecki 2009](#), p. 107ff). All these studies have shown that “the dead can still be significant members of families and communities” and that for some bereaved people, the agency of the deceased has a psychological benefit ([Klass and Steffen 2018](#), p. 4).

The importance of the agency of the dead was also recognized in the context of the social transformation of the (formerly) socialist countries after 1989, including Bosnia and Herzegovina. However, these studies mainly focused on the dead bodies and on the political actors who used these bodies in post-socialist societies (see [Henig 2017](#), p. 47; [Verdery 1999](#), pp. 27–33, 95–102; [Hayden 1994](#), p. 172ff; [Petrovic-Steger 2006](#)). In addition, the agency of the *ghosts* of the victims of the Srebrenica genocide was discussed as articulating and maintaining the Bosniaks’ memory of the massacre in light of its persistent denial by the Bosnian Serbs ([Mencej 2021](#)). In contrast to the dead as political agents, on which these studies have focused, in this paper I will discuss the dead as agents (understood as those who “cause events to happen in their vicinity”—see [Gell 1998](#), p. 16) in the context of vernacular magic practices. I will argue that in these practices the dead prove to be primarily moral agents.

3. Moral Framework for Behavior towards the Dead

In order to show that the dead may exhibit agency, and that their agency is closely interwoven with issues of morality, I will start with the narratives about necromantic practice. While this practice appears to have died out—I have only come across three narratives discussing it—I will demonstrate that the technique itself draws on vernacular notions that continue to inform people’s everyday lives. The first two narratives, which I present below, were both related by Azra⁶ a female folk healer, born in 1938. The first is a third-hand account of an experience she heard from her mother, who also practiced folk healing, while the second is based on her own memory of a situation she had experienced as a child when a woman visiting her mother recounted her own experience.

First narrative:

I1⁷: You know what? My mother told me, that a woman took ... that all her pearls had been stolen. She then took soil from a grave. In the evening a woman arrived from the other world. She shook the whole house. When the door opened, she was all burning in fire. [...] She looked like she had got extremely hot. She [the dead woman] says: ‘You should thank God that I am a Dobra [lit. “Good woman”, *evlija*].’⁸ [...] I had to travel through fire. [The woman who summoned her:] ‘If you are a Dobra, how come you are burning?’ [The dead woman]: ‘I split up a man and his wife.’ She said that she had worn ten, nine shirts on her journey

from Hell, and that she would never be released from it, that she would always remain in Hell. And that the dead know everything that is going on here [in the world of the living].

F: But why did the deceased come when this woman took soil from a grave?

I1: To come to her, to show her [where the pearls were].

F: Oh, so this deceased woman knew where the stolen items were?

I1: Yes, they [the dead] know everything that is going on here! Yes, and then, she [the dead woman] said, she says: 'They stole your pearls, big ones.' I don't know how many strings of pearls. She says: 'There,' she says, 'in the ashes in the stove, the crow took it up to the nest.' And it really did. [mimicking the dead woman]: 'We know everything that's going on here!' (34)

Second narrative:

A woman came up to my mother, she was all over the place, she was totally scared. My mother poured out fear⁹ for her. I was just sitting on the bench, waiting, while she was talking to my mother. She said she had nearly gone crazy. She said that someone had stolen all her bedclothes while she was taking care of the livestock. All the bed linen was stolen. It was nowhere to be found. She was poor, what could she do? She was alone, unmarried. And there she was [...]. She says: 'I went to the graveyard by the mosque and took some soil. I took soil and brought it home and put it on the windowsill in the kitchen. And I start to pray akšam.¹⁰ And I go to my room and pray jacija.¹¹ Then a banging sound starts. When I look around, I see a woman sitting. Right under the window, a woman. I ask: Where did you come from, woman? [The dead:] You know. [I:] I don't know. [She:] How do you not know, when you took my soil?! I'm from the other world. [I:] When did you die? How did you come to this world? [She:] Seventy years here is seventy minutes there. A minute there is a year here! She said that in the other world they know everything. And she [the dead woman] told her that such and such man was the one who stole from her. There it is [the stolen linen], in a cradle. In the morning, she says, when this man goes to work, you go to his place. His wife is there and when she goes to bring water from the well to make you a coffee, you search for the cradle and take your linen back. Everything was as she said, it was the way she said it would be.' That woman, if it hadn't been for my mother, who poured fear for her, she would have died from fear. [...]

F: So, the deceased woman arrived because that woman took some soil from her grave. And then ...?

I1: Then you put the soil in a cloth. And you put a pinch of soil in its place. And you take it home. And the dead immediately follow. They were seen coming from a hole [in a grave].

F: And what do they look like, coming out?

I1: Well, just like me and you. [...] They [the dead] were asked about it. And they said that their body decays, but a new one comes. Dear God gives them the same body as the one that they had while alive. And he gives them a soul. This is an invisible body. That's what they say, that's what I heard. [...]

F: Could you yourself do it [i.e., summon the dead]?

I1: One is not allowed to.

F: But some people would do that, nonetheless?

I1: Yes, some would. That's not allowed. You are not allowed to. What is, is.¹² (34, I1)

While the necromantic practices discussed in both narratives told by the same female narrator were said to be carried out by female summoners, and the dead who appeared to

them with the required information were likewise females, in the following narrative, told by Adem (a male narrator, born in 1938), it was a male summoner and a deceased male that figured in the main roles. Moreover, the narrator claimed to have personally known the man who carried out a necromantic practice in order to find the whereabouts of his missing oxen. Referring to a known source as well as introducing detailed information about the location of both the source and his missing livestock, as the second narrator does, may, of course, serve as narrative devices used to make the story sound authentic and credible (Dégh 1996, p. 39). However, the narrator also gave a rather detailed description of the procedure carried out by the summoner, which does seem to indicate that the practice may have actually been carried out:

Third narrative:

I1: There is one case that people know about. I knew this one, he is dead now. His oxen were gone. Do you know what oxen are? They were gone. No one noticed them, no one saw them, neither where they were nor . . . He goes to a hodja.¹³ The hodja says: You will find them.—But where?—Two months have passed [since they disappeared]. The dead person needs to be summoned from the otherworld! Not everyone is allowed to do that, and they have to be trained! And he went and took soil from the grave. Soil and something else, I don't know what. And put it under his head. At home. He goes to sleep. And then, at some point during the night [he hears the dead person speaking]: 'Give back what you took, don't bother me! Your oxen are here and here. Don't bother me!' His wife was sleeping beside him, his son was there, his daughter, but nobody heard anything. Only he heard it. He couldn't sleep anymore [. . .]. In the morning, he woke up totally soaked. He went there [where the dead told him his oxen would be], with another man. And in the mountains, he found the oxen.

F: And where was that?

I1: That was close to A., it happened here in L., but the oxen were found near A. [. . .]

F: So, when he put the soil from a grave under the pillow, the dead person from that grave came to tell him where the oxen were?

I1: He was told. Where the oxen were, where he would find them. And then he went back and put that [soil] back, and returned it to the grave, to the graveyard. He found the oxen and brought them back. [. . .] The one who came to tell him was a Dobri [lit. Good man, evlija].

F: But why did he take the soil from the grave?

I1: So that the deceased comes to you. [. . .] He came because of the soil. To ask him to give back what is his. We are told that one is not allowed to walk over graves.

F: So that's how one can summon the dead, if one takes soil from a grave?

I1: Well, that's power. Power! (33)

Despite some differences regarding the exact location where the soil brought home should be placed (on the windowsill, under the pillow, in an unspecified place at home), in all three interviews the summoning of the dead required the summoner to bring soil home from a cemetery.¹⁴ This request implies that it was not enough for the living to manipulate the earth in situ; for the practice to trigger the desired effect, i.e., the 'arrival' of the dead who could provide a desired piece of information, the necromancer had to bring the soil from a cemetery into the domestic space.

The act of transferring soil from the cemetery to the domestic space, which was crucial for triggering the "arrival" of the dead, violated a rule, well-known in European vernacular religion, which posits a separation between the realms of the living and the dead: what

belongs in the cemetery, i.e., in the empirical “other world” on earth, where the dead live on just as they did when they were alive, should not cross the boundary of the domestic sphere, which basically means “this world”; and vice versa (cf. Schneeweiss [1961] 2005, p. 142; Arukask 1998, p. 11; Dorđević 2002, p. 437; Siikala 2002, p. 216; Francis et al. 2005, pp. 101–3; Cowdell 2011, p. 55; Koski 2008; 2019, pp. 180–81). When the soil from a grave, consubstantial with the dead buried in it, “endowed with an extraordinary significance” (Balkan 2015, p. 123), is brought into the domestic space, it represents an “alien”, “otherworldly” object in the realm where it does not belong, just as the dead body represents an alien object in this world until it is transferred to the cemetery. The agency that the dead exhibit when the soil is brought home from a graveyard may therefore be understood as both a sign and a consequence of a disturbance of the boundary between the worlds. This is therefore strictly forbidden in everyday life, and people are generally careful to keep the boundary between the worlds intact and not risk being confronted with the consequences of transgressing it, i.e., the agency of the dead.

However, although the notion that the dead disrupt the boundary between worlds and consequently cause disorder in the universe, when they are brought into “this world” consubstantial with the soil from the grave, could well be the rationale for the prohibition on bringing soil from a grave into the domestic space, this was not how my interlocutors understood it. For the people I spoke to, the ban on taking soil or other objects brought from a grave to a home—to which my interlocutors generally adhered in everyday life—was more a question of disturbed property relations and, more generally, disturbed morals. Over coffee with Rezija and her neighbors, who were gathered in her living room for the last time before the upcoming Ramadan, during which visiting is not considered appropriate, they were astonished by my question as to why it is forbidden to bring soil from a grave. For them, the answer was clear:

The soil is the property of the person who lies there. You are not allowed to bring anything from the cemetery, common! (MM041, I3)

Referring to the *property* of the dead being at the core of the prohibition to take soil from a grave, this statement implies that the dead are understood as social agents, having the same right to their property as the living. Taking their property, that is, soil or anything else from their grave, is therefore an act that is tantamount to the unauthorized taking of another person’s property. While grave desecration and grave robbery can be punished under civil law, my interlocutors described the violation of the property rights of the dead as a moral and not a legal offence. Those who have committed such an offence are said to have violated a *moral* norm: This is a forbidden act, *haram*,¹⁵ they would stress.

I1: Don’t take anything from the cemetery, why would you need it?

F: Would there be any consequences if you did?

I1: There wouldn’t be any, but the haram is huge! You would dream something, something would come to you in dreams. (14)

Now, the term “haram”, used by the interlocutor above, has a special meaning in the Islamic moral system. According to Islam, the entire cosmos is based on the principles of what is permitted (*halal*) and what is forbidden (*haram*), and it is through them that harmony in life is established (Ša’rawi 2005, p. 5). In Islam, stealing is considered a “forbidden” and destructive form of acquisition and is regarded as an ethical transgression (M. El-Gazali 2007, pp. 48–49). Acquiring property in a haram manner, i.e., by force, under threat, by theft, by abuse of power or in other unlawful ways, will only bring harm, problems, misfortune and ruin to people, warns the Islamic scholar Muhammad M. Sha’rawi (Ša’rawi 2005, pp. 60–69). Yet in these texts, the forbidden ways of acquiring property refer to acquiring property from another person. The taking of property from a dead person is not envisioned, since “a dead person cannot own property”, as Hedaya, a 12th century legal manual by Burhan al-Din al-Marghinani, considered one of the most influential compendia of Hanafi jurisprudence, argues, explaining why the taking of a shroud from a corpse

cannot be punished as theft (Forte 1985, p. 64). For my interlocutors, on the other hand, the soil and objects on a grave were considered the property of the dead, and theft from the dead was considered a moral offence, falling into the same category as theft from the living. Taking their property, i.e., soil or other objects from their grave, was considered haram in the context of vernacular morality, just as it was considered haram to appropriate the property of the living in a forbidden manner.

While Islamic scholar formulated the misfortune resulting from the forbidden acquisition of property in abstract and vague terms, the misfortune resulting from the forbidden acquisition of property from the dead is rather concrete, almost tangible, in the vernacular notions. The least a person who committed such an unauthorized act could expect was that the dead would appear in their dreams, as indicated above (*You would dream something, something would come to you in a dream*—see Int. 14).¹⁶ The dead, moreover, may also resort to more drastic measures. Stories that convey experiences of people taking property from the dead reveal that the dead exhibit their agency through auditory or visual “apparitions”. The dead can articulate their demands by threatening those who have taken their property, shouting at them, shaking, rattling and hammering on their house and similar actions, as is made clear in the following interviews:

I: And there is one man, I know him, he is still alive, he went to that graveyard, and took wine that was left there, wine, I guess, that’s what they say . . . And he took [smiles] that bottle, drank it and took it home. And it came to him, it came to him at night saying that he had to return it: ‘Where is my wine? It must be returned to where it was!’ [imitating the dead person]. He got so frightened that he couldn’t fall asleep until . . . He had to immediately return it [the bottle of wine] to where it used to be! This means that you can only drink it there, by the grave. And not take anything away!

F: Was it the dead person who came after him?

I: That dead person, of course. But he [the man] didn’t see it [the dead person] at all. He just heard it [laughs loudly]. (108)

I1: One of my neighbours, and her brother, they went to school. And on their way they took flowers from a graveyard. [. . .] When they came home, it [the dead person] immediately came after them. They almost died of fright. And the dead requested that they return those flowers. It came to the house, saying: ‘If you don’t return them, I will strangle you all!’ And their father had to go down [to the graveyard] at night—what a hole where it ascended from was there! And he went down and brought [the flowers back]. In the evening. Their father. That’s what they told me. Ah, I laughed. Yes. And there was . . . rattling, rattling, the door opens, the whole house shakes [when the dead person arrives].

F: So, when you take something from a grave, the dead person comes after you and tells you to return it?

I1: Yes, yes. They come. Indeed! (34)

Such (mainly second-hand) memorates about personal experiences may indeed occasionally turn into fabulates (Dégh 2001, pp. 103, 124) or even jokes and fiks, mediated to children with an obvious didactic intention, as Salma recalls from her childhood:

I2: There was a story . . . [pause, stuttering] How did it go? Someone took . . . was it eggs? . . . from a Serbian graveyard . . . Was it on Easter? How does it go . . .? Well, someone took something, there was meat. Well, that’s the story, when we were children, that’s what they used to tell us. Well, someone took that from grave. And, they say, that the dead came in the evening, saying [quietly]: ‘Give me my meat!’ [laughs]

I1: It freaks you out.

I2: 'Give me my meat!' [quietly, imitating the dead]. And this one person shouts [loudly]: 'I won't!' Well, that's what we remembered. (27)

In all these interviews, it is clear that the dead harass the living in order to reclaim property that rightfully belongs to them: they come to reclaim their wine and meat and insist that their property be returned to their grave. Only when their property has been stolen, or rather, when the moral norm of the permissible way of acquiring property was violated, do the dead demonstrate agency. As long as people adhere to the moral rules, they remain silent and invisible. So rather than risk the dead bothering them in dreams, or worse, as apparitions, most people will abide by the culturally established norms of moral behavior towards the dead. Indeed, the reluctance to take soil or other objects home from a graveyard was unanimously expressed in all interviews. In the next extract from an interview with Behija, she recalls her own childhood, when she had been offered wood from a graveyard but was nonetheless too afraid to accept it:

They had wood up there, in the cemetery, that is. So, they chopped it down, cleaned it up and said to me: Take it! I wanted to haul wood. They said: Here, take it, you can use it for heating in the spring. But when I entered the cemetery, I got a strange feeling and ran away. Nobody said anything to me, I had permission to take the wood ... (27, I2)

4. (Mis)Use of the Dead

Thus, while people in everyday life generally adhere to the moral norms of appropriate behavior towards the dead that are imposed on them by cultural codes, the knowledge that violating the moral norms would cause the dead to manifest their agency may at the same time be a resource that some people can deliberately use to their own advantage in magic. In the expectation that the dead would demonstrate agency if one were to take soil home from a grave, one could thus deliberately commit the forbidden act in order to trigger the expected consequence and extort the desired response from the dead—as was the case with a necromantic practice. Furthermore, the same knowledge could also be used to the detriment of others: by bringing the property of the dead, such as soil or other objects from a grave, into contact with the property of a person you wish to harm, you can deliberately cause the dead to turn their agency against that person. Such a magical practice, in which soil from a grave is used against another person, was already described in ethnographic literature at the beginning of the 20th century:

"To make the house haunt and tremble, it is done like this: if someone goes to the cemetery in the middle of the night and takes soil from a grave, puts it in a hole drilled with a drill in the centre or in a beam in the attic of a house under construction and then closes it well with a plug, every night at the time the soil was taken out, the dead person would come and walk around the house and push or shake the house to get that soil again." (Dragičević 1908, p. 460; from Vlasenica)

However, the same type of sorcery is still widely feared and allegedly practiced in today's Bosnia and Herzegovina. As we sat with Safet and Amina one afternoon in their kitchen in a village where many refugees from Srebrenica, like them, settled after the war, they talked about their health problems, their struggle to survive with social support and financial problems that did not allow them to finish the house. Finally, they revealed what they believe is the real cause of their ongoing problems: a plank from a grave nailed into the wall of their house. Or, at least this was what a magic specialist they had consulted told them:

I1: If someone drives a nail from the graveyard into the house ... everything deteriorates, it can never progress ...

I2: There is no progress in anything, there is no health, that's it ...

F: Do you know someone to whom that happened?

I1: Well, it was me. [...]

I2: When we, the immigrants, when we started to build the house, a board from a grave was nailed to our house. We didn't know ...

F: Do you know who did it?

I2: Well, now ... you can't ...

I1: If I knew, I would kill him!

F: But how do you know that ...?

I2: Because I went to a certain woman to help me and she immediately told me at which side of the house the board was nailed, where it was brought from and everything.

F: And did it have any consequences for you? [...]

I1: Everything goes wrong, it doesn't go the way you thought it would, it goes in the opposite direction.

F: What specifically happened to you?

I1: Disease, immediately disease ...

F: And then when you went to see this woman?

I2: I went to that woman's house to get help. She told us what it was and why and from what and where. We removed it [the board], took it out ...

F: And was it better then?

I2: Then it started getting a little better. (11)

The notion that the dead would cause misfortunes to the person whose property has been sprinkled by the soil from a grave precisely because they demand their *property* back is indeed explicitly expressed in the next interview that I conducted with Safija and her husband. Safija, who has been suffering from mental health problems for a long time, blamed all her problems on the magic with grave soil performed by one of her closest neighbors:

I1: You know what, you know what I heard? I heard that when someone wants to harm you ... When you are working and they want to disturb your work, they would go to the graveyard, take some soil, and throw it over your house.

I2: And also bury it in front of the house.

I1: For the whole year you would have to work like a horse, and you could only sleep, nothing else.

F: But how could taking soil from the cemetery cause this?

I1: Well, what do I know, well, nature has it, nature has its own power, everything has its own ... When we believe in everything! [...] They say they are coming after you, they request that their soil be given back.

F: The dead come to request the soil back?

I1: Indeed, [they come] to get their soil back. (37)

5. Conclusions

I started this paper by presenting three accounts of necromantic practices that I recorded during my fieldwork in Central Bosnia, in order to establish the underlying premise on which the practice or rather the technique of necromancy is based. While nowadays the practice of necromancy seems to have died out, it is based on vernacular notions that continue to inform people's everyday lives: the notions that the dead have agency and, moreover, that their grave, and anything on it, is their property and should

not be taken from them. The acquittance of their property, i.e., soil or other objects from a grave, is thus seen as a violation of moral norms, resulting in the dead manifesting their agency. The underlying idea, then, is that the dead assert their agency when moral norms are violated. As long as the moral norms are observed and upheld, people do not perceive their agency, and this is the state that they would generally strive for in daily life. However, based on the very same notion that the act of taking property from the dead is a violation of a moral norm—the expected consequence of which is the manifestation of their agency—individuals can also intentionally violate the norm in order to trigger that very consequence. By bringing soil home from a grave (as in necromancy) or by bringing it into contact with the property of a person to whom one intends to do harm (as in harmful magic), one can (mis)use the dead for their own benefit or to others' detriment. While in the first case, a person trained in necromancy who intentionally summons the dead has personal power to have them under control—they can direct the agency of the dead according to their will and thus negotiate with, or rather “blackmail” the dead for the return of their property in exchange for the answer they seek. In the second case, on the other hand, a person who is unaware that the property of the dead was buried in their property, or in some other way put in contact with it, becomes a victim of their harassment aimed at getting the property back.

The dead thus proved to be not just magical agents, but above all moral agents. They ensure that people adhere to cultural expectations and fulfil the requirements of cultural norms, but also that they are held accountable for their infractions. They contribute to the maintenance of moral norms by directly responding to their transgressions: visually, auditory, through dreams, but also physically, and through various misfortunes that befall the transgressors. By maintaining “a kind of moral action that reproduces pre-existing patterns of behavior”, they thus actively participate in what Robbins calls the “morality of reproduction” (Robbins 2015, p. 118). Moreover, morality reinforced by the dead is grounded in experience. Indeed, it is “experienced in passages of intersubjectivity”, in the “space between persons” (Parish 2014, pp. 31–33)—just that the persons involved are those that are embodied as well as those that are not.

Funding: The research leading to the results presented in the paper has received funding from the European Research Council grant agreement No. 101095729 (DEAGENCY). Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Research Council Executive Agency; neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them. The author also acknowledges the financial support from the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency ARIS (Research core funding No. P6-0187).

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Ethics Committees of the Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana, and of the European Research Council Executive Agency (ERCEA) (protocol code (2023)3275953—10 May 2023) for studies involving humans.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: Data is unavailable due to ethical restrictions.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ The term “Bosniaks” implies a wider category, including people who may not be Muslim believers but are culturally Muslims (see Duranović 2021, p. 12).
- ² This seems to be specially often a case in Scandinavia (see Klintberg 2010, M81–85; Jauhiainen 1998, D301, D311, D321, D331, D341, D351, D361; Siikala 2002, p. 219; Gunnell 2012).
- ³ There are several practices in the Balkans that in this or another way imply communication with the dead. Neagota (2014) writes about communication with the dead in Romania through trance. Likewise rusalia/rusalje ritual sometimes imply communication with the dead (see, for instance, Litsas 1976; Ivkov-Džigurski et al. 2012), as does treasure hunting (see Greenfield 1988).

Communication with fairies who incorporated characteristics of the dead (see Pócs 1989, pp. 13, 16–18; 2017) was also common in the Balkans. I would like to thank to Éva Pócs for drawing my attention to these practices and helped with the literature.

4 Emilijan Lilek, Slovenian “antiquarian” who worked as a teacher in Sarajevo from 1883–1902 and published extensively on “folk beliefs” and rituals in Bosnia and Herzegovina, among others also tackled the so-called *Todtenorakel* (lit. ‘the oracle of the dead’). According to Lilek, the practice of summoning the dead, aimed at discovering a thief, took place by the grave of a known deceased in the dead of night, and involved a formulaic incantation by which the summoner called the dead person by their name and begged them to reveal who stole their property. This is how he describes the practice: “If something is stolen from a man or a woman, then this man or this woman goes to some known grave in the dead of night (i.e., around 9 or 10 o’clock in the evening). Arriving at the grave, they call the dead [person] by their name and conjure them by [saying] something like this: ‘By the God who created and destroyed you, you are my brother, by God! Please tell me who stole my thing.’ After that, they return home without looking back. When they get home, they immediately go to sleep. The summoned dead man comes to them in [their] dreams and says: ‘Why do you conjure me like that and rattle my bones? Your thing was stolen by this and this person’”.

5 The Christian Church had positioned itself firmly against necromancy by the 4th century AD. The influential Christian philosopher Augustine (354–430 CE) rejected the existence of ghosts and argued that “good revelations” in necromantic practices come from the angels, whereas malignant ones come from the demons (Morton 2020, pp. 49–50, 56, 59). By the 13th century, reaching its peak in the West in the 15th century, necromancy was viewed as an illusion, evoked by the demons and the Devil; the summoned dead were identified as demons, and necromancers—together with other magic specialists—as witches, believed to be working with the Devil (Jolly 2002, p. 59).

6 All names are pseudonyms.

7 I in the interviews indicates an Interlocutor, and F the folklorist, i.e., the author. The number in the brackets after the interviews refers to the number of the interview (and the interlocutor, if there were several interviewed simultaneously).

8 From the Arabic *waliyya*, a sort of Muslim “saint” (cf. Bejtić 1982; Bringa 1995, p. 174). It seems contradictory, however, that an *evlija* would dwell in a hell, which seems to be the place where she comes from, according to the narrative. As in vernacular Islamic practices, *evlijas* serve as mediators between the living and God, as well as the dead (Bringa 1995, pp. 171–77; Schimmel 2001, pp. 105–6; Rosen 2002, p. 76; Softić 2002, p. 120; Burkhalter 2004, p. 724; Mittermeier 2011, pp. 161–62), *evlija* may have replaced the “normal” dead to solve the problem of the “return” of the dead in official Islam. Moreover, their extraordinary abilities, beyond those of ordinary mortals, such as clairvoyance (during their lifetime), and their (post-mortem) ability to move from one place to another (Softić 2002, pp. 126, 133, 145), may be additional reasons for *evlijas* to figure in the narratives, insofar as they demonstrate the very same abilities. Nonetheless, the rather widespread legends about *evlijas* among the Bosnian Muslims in central Bosnia never refer to a *Dobri* or *Dobra* being summoned to provide information about missing property. Instead, they worship their impeccable life, strictly subordinated to Islamic faith and values, and emphasise their ability to punish or reward people’s behaviour (cf. Softić 2002, pp. 126–27).

9 A practice called *salijevanje strave* (lit. “the pouring/casting (out) of fear/horror”), carried out in particular when someone gets frightened, is nervous, etc. (cf. Ugljen 1893; Grdić-Bjelokosić 1896, pp. 151–52; Filipović 1949, p. 218).

10 *Aksham* is the time of the fourth daily prayer for Muslims, at sunset, when people are believed to be most vulnerable to the attacks of otherworldly beings.

11 A Muslim prayer which one prays until sunrise, but may start any time after sunset, i.e., *aksham*.

12 The text has been lightly edited as the narration was somewhat unintelligible; it has also been shortened and a series of sentences partly reordered for clarity.

13 Muslim cleric, imam.

14 Although Bourguignon writes that myths, legends and literary works on necromancy seldom provide information on actual techniques that may have been employed in certain communities (Bourguignon 2005, p. 6451), incantation as a technique of summoning the dead seems to have continuously appeared in various accounts of necromancy over time and in different places, from the first millennium BC Babilon, to the Greek Magical Papyri from Egypt, to literary texts, such as Lucan’s *Pharsalia*, Lucian’s *Menippus: A Necromantic Experiment*, Johann Georg Faust’s *The Threefold Coercion of Hell*, up to famous Renaissance necromancers John Dee and Edward Kelley from 16–17th c. (Morton 2020, pp. 21, 24–25, 37–40, 68, 74–75).

15 An Arabic term meaning impermissible, forbidden or unlawful.

16 Dreams is probably the most common channel of communication between the living and the dead, not only in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but cross-culturally (cf. Danforth and Tsiras 1982, p. 135; Goldey 1983, p. 6; Geary 1994, p. 90; Astuti 2007, pp. 301–4). In Islam, sleep is considered a “small death” (Ruthven [2000] 2003, p. 51) and dreams “bridges of communication between this world and the hereafter” (M. e. H. El-Gazali 1998, pp. 43–48, 56; Mabrouk 2001, pp. 11–13; Mittermeier 2011, pp. 149–150; Sariyannis 2013, pp. 191–192, 211). As el-Aswad writes, “[d]reams themselves are signs of the unseen world in which the soul can penetrate and transform dramatic events into symbols that affect them mentally and emotionally.” (el-Aswad 2002, p. 90) Indeed, in vernacular notions in Bosnia, “apparitions” of the dead in dreams are considered a typical sign that the rules of conduct have been violated.

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