

Article

The Living and the Dead in Slavic Folk Culture: Modes of Interaction between Two Worlds

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Abstract: Slavic folk culture is a fusion of Christian and of pre-Christian, pagan beliefs based on magic. This article is devoted specifically to ancient pre-Christian ideas about death and posthumous existence and the associated magical rituals and prohibitions, which persist to our time. It considers the following interactions between the living and the dead: 1. the measures taken and prohibitions observed by the living to ensure their well-being in the other world; 2. the measures taken by the living to ensure the well-being of their dead relatives in the other world (including funeral rites; memorial rites; cemetery visits; providing the dead with food, clothes, and items necessary for postmortem life; and sending messages to the other world); 3. communication between the living and the dead on certain days (including taking opportunities to meet, see, and hear them; treat them; prepare a bed for them; and wash them); 4. fear of the dead and their return and the desire to placate them to prevent them from causing natural disasters (hail, droughts, floods, etc.), crop failures, cattle deaths, diseases, and death; 5. magical ways for protecting oneself from the “walking dead”; 6. transforming the dead into mythological characters—for example, house-, water-, or forest-spirits and mermaids. The material presented in the article is drawn from published and archival sources collected by folklorists and ethnographers of the XIX and XX centuries in different regions of the Slavic world, as well as from field recordings made by the author and his colleagues in Polesie, the borderland of Belarus and Ukraine, in the 1960–1980s, in the Russian North and in the Carpathian region in the 1990s. It shows that the relationship between the living and the dead in folk beliefs does not fit comfortably within the widespread notion of an “ancestor cult”. It argues that the dead are both venerated and feared and that the living feel a dependence on their ancestors and a desire to strictly observe the boundary between the two worlds.

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1. Introduction

The existence of two separate worlds—the world of the living and the world of the dead—is one of the most important ideas of Slavic philosophy. This concept of the two worlds contains many ambiguities, contradictions, and antinomies¹. According to some beliefs, the world of the dead is spatially separated from the world of the living: it can, for example, be located on a high mountain, under the earth, behind the water where the sun sets, in the lower or northern sky, on a rainbow, or on a distant island (SD 1995–2012, vol. 5, pp. 298–303). According to other beliefs, the dead stay close to the living on Earth, in a special, allocated place—in a cemetery or in a grave, from where they can come out at night, communicate with each other, and visit their living relatives. The living, in turn, periodically visit the dead. These two worlds can be understood as being opposed to each other, as mirroring each other, or as a continuation from one to the other. The dead can retain their bodily appearance in the other world and continue to engage in their earthly affairs—a priest remains a priest; a monk remains a monk; a thief remains a thief². The soul of the deceased does not necessarily leave Earth but can take up residence in a new body and continue its earthly existence (metempsychosis).³

The dead are periodically present also in their home location (on memorial days or on some calendar holidays). According to many stories, they come out of the grave at night, sometimes visit their living relatives, and, with the coming of morning, when the cocks begin to crow, they return to their graves or “burrows”. In some stories, they participate in the burial of the new dead, standing at the gate of the cemetery or over the freshly dug grave (Vakarelski 1990, pp. 38–39). According to beliefs in Polesie, the soul of the last deceased in the village guards the cemetery gate at the funeral of the latest person to die—the person who will succeed them in this position. This guard can allegedly be seen during the funeral (PA). In some regions of Serbia, it is believed that in autumn memorial days (*zadushnica*) DATE? (which can be timed to coincide with various holidays), graves are opened and remain open for some time. On these days, the deceased come out of the graves and walk in the places where they walked when they were alive. Many also do the same work that they performed while alive. Peasants believe that on these days, the dead meet their relatives, but people do not see them (Bulat 1922, p. 242).

Thus, it remains unclear “whether the ‘realm of death’ is closed and remote from the ‘realm of the living’ and whether it is embedded in the latter or dissolved in it” (Sedakova 2004, p. 37). This antinomy of life and death, according to O.A. Sedakova, is overcome in the folk picture of the world, which characterizes the visible and the invisible. The invisibility of the inhabitants of the other world serves to remove the boundary between the two worlds and allows the simultaneous presence of the dead, both next to the living and in a distant other world. But in any case, these worlds are thought of as being separated by a strictly guarded boundary. The border between the worlds can have both spatial (topographical) and temporal dimensions, or it can be symbolic. The spatial boundary between the worlds can be a water barrier (a river, sea, or spring, for example) (Mencej 1997) or roads, boundaries, crossroads, forks of roads, bridges, or thresholds of houses; a vertical boundary can be a mountain or a tree (Agapkina 2019, pp. 371–99)⁴. One can cross over to the other world by water, by road, by bridge, or by tree; can send something there for one’s dead relatives; or remove something dangerous from the world of the living. For example, in Polesie, one can expel a disease by throwing a sick person’s shirt into water or onto the road or by hanging it on a tree (PA). In this way, dangerous things are sent to the next world. The temporal boundary is at the dangerous times of midday and midnight or on some days or at periods of the yearly calendar (especially holy days and the period from Easter to Trinity Sunday), when there are strict prohibitions on certain actions and behaviors. In a symbolic sense, the boundary between the two worlds is overcome in rituals, which are always ultimately addressed to the other world and its inhabitants.

The violation of the boundary by both the living and the dead poses a danger to the world order and is, therefore, regulated by rituals. The interruption of the boundary between the worlds comes every time a new person is born into the world or when a death occurs. Therefore, the rituals associated with the birth of a child and with the funeral of the deceased are especially symbolically loaded and subject to strict prescriptions and prohibitions. However, practically every rite and even every act of everyday ritual behavior involves, to a greater or lesser extent, communication between the worlds. One can say that in a certain sense, the whole traditional worldview is oriented toward the world beyond.

The relation of the living to the world of the dead is usually defined by the concept of an ancestor cult. This concept implies various mental, ritual, and verbal forms of veneration, worship, and deification of ancestors. However, this cult includes, in addition, or even, above all else, fear of the dead, on whom, according to popular beliefs, the well-being of the living and the entire world order depends. The closest contacts between the two worlds occur in funeral and memorial rites, the focus of which is the deceased. They provide special forms of ritual behavior, prescriptions, and prohibitions, which should make contacts (real or symbolic) between living people and the world of the dead useful and safe for both sides.

These contacts of the two worlds will be explored through the following elements: 1. the concern of living people about their posthumous existence; 2. the care of living people

for the welfare of their deceased relatives in the other world; 3. the communication of the living with the dead on certain days; 4. the fear of the dead and measures to prevent the negative consequences of their return; 5. magical measures of defense against the walking dead; and 6. the demonization of dead people.

2. Concern of the Living about Their Postmortem Existence Is One of the Most Important Aspects of Popular Ideas about the Mutual Dependence between the World of the Living and the World of the Dead

In the ancient Slavic culture, the idea of the inseparability of earthly and postmortem existences is manifested in the universal belief that all deeds and actions of living people will find a response or reaction in the other world and that this will affect their posthumous fate. The observance of rules, regulations, and prohibitions allows people to ensure for themselves a prosperous afterlife, while the violation of these rules dooms a person to a painful death or to torment and punishment after death. Russian “spiritual” poems (combining Christian and folklore motifs) and oral stories about visits to the other world during lethargy (*obmiranie*) contain a whole list of earthly sins and their related posthumous punishments: for example, according to the Polesie data, women who killed their children are doomed to eat their bodies (bloody meat) in the other world; witches who took milk from cows will spew it out of themselves in Hell; witches who left *zaloms* (twisted ears) in other people’s fields and, thus, spoiled the harvest will spin straw in the other world; and a drunkard will carry tar in a barrel and drink it (PA, Gomel region).

The Bulgarians believed that women who had abortions would eat the meat of their murdered children in the other world. According to Belorussian beliefs, “whoever stole something must carry it in his teeth” (or “carry it on his shoulders”), and “whoever stole a ring or a needle must crawl through the eye of a needle or through a ring in the other world” (Federowski 1897, pp. 1058–59). In Bosnia and Montenegro, (the Kuchi tribe) people believed that one who violated the boundary of the fields and seized land from another’s plot would wear this appropriated earth around his neck in the next world. On icons in the monasteries of Montenegro and Boka Kotorska, the sinner was depicted as burning in the flames of Hell with a plow that the devil had hung around his neck (Barjaktarović 1952, p. 61)⁵.

According to the beliefs of the Eastern Slavs, in the other world, every person faces a table on which his “good deeds” are displayed, in particular, what the person gave to others during their lifetime—to guests, travelers, poor people, and beggars. Bulgarians in Strandzha believed that if a person did not fast during the first days of Lent, an empty jug would stand before him in the other world, and he would not be able to quench his thirst (Agapkina 2002, p. 48). It is considered as being dangerous to leave a piece of bread uneaten; according to Ukrainian beliefs, it will “chase you in the other world” (Zaglada 1931, p. 182). It is a well-known superstition that if you take a new piece of bread by mistake, without finishing the first one, someone will remain hungry in the next world. It is also dangerous to drop breadcrumbs on the floor—Slovenes believed that after death, a person’s soul would suffer for as many years in the other world as the number of crumbs they dropped and trampled on. Belorussians considered it to be necessary, after taking bread out of the oven, to pour cold water on it as soon as possible so that in Hell, they did not spare water for souls. (Federowski 1897, p. 381). In Polesie, a housewife, after taking bread out of the oven, hurried to put a log in it so that when she died, this log would be a bridge for her to cross to the other world. A weaver, having finished weaving yarn, had to make sure that there were no stakes left on the wall on which the threads were stretched. Otherwise, when they died, their mouth would be open. According to other beliefs, if you leave a warp thread on the wall for the night, you will not see in the other world (PES 1983, pp. 227, 243).

Among the Eastern Slavs everywhere, but especially strictly among the Old Believers, it was forbidden to throw away clipped nails or hair—they were buried in the ground, plugged in cracks and corners of the house, or collected in a special bag, and after death, they were put in the coffin. It was believed that the deceased would need them during the

transition to the other world, when climbing a high glass mountain or crossing an abyss (SD 1995–2012, vol. 3, pp. 427–29).

In folk pictures of the world, a person's lifetime includes not only his existence from birth to death but also a certain period before birth (prenatal stage) and a period of postmortem existence. In the first period, from conception (and even earlier, from the time of the marriage of one's parents) to birth, a person's life and destiny, including his postmortem existence, are largely programmed. Many prohibitions and prescriptions relating to conception and the period of pregnancy are observed for this very reason. For example, a pregnant woman was not supposed to knit or weave ropes. Otherwise, her future child would hang themselves. She would also avoid bathing in running water so that her child would not drown (SD 1995–2012, vol. 1, pp. 163, 283).

3. Care by the Living for the Welfare of the Dead in the Other World

After death, the soul of the deceased remains on Earth for some time. The period of its stay is defined in different ways: for example, until the church funeral, until the last strike of the funeral bell, until forty days or six weeks after death, or until the next death in the village. Until the burial, the souls of dead persons stay in the house together with the living. The living leave water on the window so that the dead can drink and wash themselves, hang out a towel so that they can dry themselves, put out bread so that they can eat, "treat" them with food and steam from the memorial table, open doors or windows so that they can fly out and return, cover up vessels with water so that they do not fall in and drown, and cover mirrors so that these souls do not get trapped inside them. The peasants of the Smolensk region left food and bedding for the deceased for forty days after death. They covered the bench on which the deceased was lying with a towel on which they placed water and bread. They also hung a ribbon or a flap outside the house, by which the soul could find its home (Listova 1993, p. 70). They believed that even after the burial, the soul did not go far from home and that it was only after a certain period of time (usually forty days) that it finally left the earthly world and moved to the other world.

At the same time, even after the final departure, the dead are periodically present in the home space—for example, on memorial days, on certain holidays, and during certain periods of the year. They stay, for example, in the walls of the house, in the corners, behind icons, in crevices, under the roof, under the threshold, in the hearth, in the stovepipe, in the rubbish, in the broom, in the mirror, in the cellar, in the attic, in the stable, in the bed, or in the clothes of the deceased (SD 1995–2012, vol. 2, p. 165).

The main purpose of funeral and memorial rituals is to ensure the well-being of the deceased by providing everything necessary (such as light, heat, water, food, and clothing) for the transition to the other world and the afterlife. But these rituals had another side: they were motivated not only by concern for the deceased but also by fear for the living and the desire to protect the living from dangerous contact with death. We will not touch on this second aspect herein, but consider actions aimed at the well-being of the deceased, including lighting candles; washing, mourning, feeding, and dressing the deceased; and positioning them in the coffin, which were motivated not only by fear for the deceased but also by the desire to protect the living from dangerous contact with death.

According to Serbian customs, the deceased are washed so that they will be clean in the other world and dressed in their best clothes, "[W]hat they are buried in, they will be dressed in" in the afterlife is a common belief. The dying are given as much food as possible so that they would not go to the other world hungry. (Petrović 1939, p. 35). Croats believe that an unwashed dead person is not welcomed in the other world, while Russians believe that without washing, they "will have a narrow road to Heaven". (For more details see SD 1995–2012, vol. 3, pp. 464–66).

The idea of the other world as a realm of darkness and gloom explains the special concern for the sight of the deceased (SD 1995–2012, vol. 4, p. 300). It explains why lit candles are necessary at funeral and memorial rites. Sometimes, a candle is lit during a person's final moments to ease the death. Candles are intended to illuminate the deceased's

path to the other world. Without these candles among the living, it would be dark in the other world (Zečević 1982, p. 48). The candles in the hands of the relatives seeing off and remembering the deceased symbolically provide the deceased with light after death. In Bulgaria, sometimes mourners put candles in the coffin so that they can be passed on to relatives in the other world with the hope that in the future, they too will be met with candles on their arrival there. In memorial ceremonies, a candle has to be lit at the grave as well as in the house (a separate candle for each of the deceased relatives) (see SD 1995–2012, vol. 4, p. 569). In Polesie, a flame is kept burning in the house of the deceased until forty days after the death so that the soul can see its way to the other world (PA, Volyn region).

Concern for the eyesight of the recently deceased is also manifest in everyday life. There can be strict prohibitions on activities, such as spinning, sewing, whitewashing walls, washing floors, pouring water over the threshold, or chopping trees, for fear of harming the dead by sewing, clogging, or smearing their eyes, soaking their feet, or crushing them (Tolstoy 1995). In the Transcarpathian region of Ukraine, if someone died in a house, it was forbidden to completely paint the walls for a whole year. It was necessary to leave at least a part of the ceiling unpainted so that the soul could find a place to rest (Bogatyrev 1973, p. 272). To not make it dark for the deceased in the other world, there was a Serbian tradition of “white mourning”, where mourning clothes were not worn at all. The rationale for this prohibition was that black mourning clothes would prevent the deceased from seeing anything (Tolstoy 1995, pp. 192–93). For the same reason, in Polesie, before people whitewashed the walls for the first time after a death, they went to the cemetery and covered the grave with a tablecloth so that the whitewash would not drip into the eyes of the deceased (PA, Rivne region). In the south of Russia, there was a custom of sweeping graves with Trinity flowers to “clean the eyes of the dead”, as well as the spring custom of “warming the dead” by lighting fires on graves (SD 1995–2012, vol. 1, pp. 543–44).

When sending the deceased on their last journey, efforts are made to provide them with everything they needed. This could include food (for example, bread, pies, salt, sugar, wine, honey, eggs, and apples), clothes, linens, a pipe, a snuff box, and a tobacco pouch. All these things together with money to pay for moving to the next world were put in the coffin or lowered into the grave. Other things could be included, such as an awl for a shoemaker, an axe for a carpenter, or a needle for a tailor (SD 1995–2012, vol. 1, pp. 555–56; Fischer 1921, pp. 163–73). Serbs have been known to put in the coffin a gun for a hunter (or, more anciently, a bow and an arrow), a whistle for a shepherd, a spinning wheel for a woman, or a mirror for a girl. Apples were put in the coffins of dead children because it was believed that children played with apples in Heaven (Vakarelski 1990, pp. 88–95). Poles put two shirts and two skirts on a dead woman so that she could change her clothes during a long journey. Ukrainians put cut fingernails on the chest of the deceased so that they could make a bridge out of them when passing to the other world (Fischer 1921, p. 180).

Mourning (lamentation) is an essential element of funerals (memorial rites), and among Eastern Slavs, the deceased could not remain unmourned. If a person died in a war, went missing, or died far from home, then, according to Serbian tradition, his relatives mourned over his clothes, weapons, or portrait (SD 1995–2012, vol. 1, p. 514). It was believed that an unmourned dead person could not cross the border of this world and rest in the other world. They would not receive absolution: “tears wash away sins” (Svencik’ky 1912, p. 27). In addition, if the deceased are not mourned, they will not look out for the interests of the remaining relatives when they die and join them in the other world (Federowski 1897, p. 321, N 1802). According to Ukrainian beliefs, the longer one weeps over the deceased, the less they will suffer in the other world (Svencik’ky 1912, p. 25). At the same time, when mourning, precautions are taken so that tears do not fall on the deceased—because this will make them “wet”, “their shirt will get wet”, “they will drown in tears”, or “the earth will be heavy for them” (SD 1995–2012, vol. 5, pp. 43–44). Serbs believed differently about weeping. For them, tears burn the deceased in the other world (SMR 1998, p. 248). They believe that the wicked in the other world bathe in the tears of orphans and the wretched. It is widely said that it is forbidden to mourn a dead child,

especially the first one; otherwise, they will be bathed in tears in the other world. From the excessive weeping of relatives, the grave of the deceased will be filled with water, the coffin will float in water, or the deceased will be wet as they walk. (SD 1995–2012, vol. 5, pp. 43–44; Federowski 1897, N 1794).

On the memorial table, there should be a lot of sweet dishes (honey, porridge, sweetened waters, and pies, for example). They are supposed to ease the deceased's transition to the other world. It was often considered as being necessary to prepare a "hot table" at funerals and wakes, as the steam from the hot food was the main food for the ancestors. At wakes, pies were broken so that "the 'grandparents' would have steam". It was widely believed that what the living brought to them on memorial days served as food for the dead in the other world.

Numerous prohibitions were observed for the welfare of the dead. Mothers whose children died were forbidden to eat the fruits of the new harvest (such as berries or apples) until a certain day (such as Trinity Sunday, Ivan's Day, or Transfiguration). Otherwise, their dead children would be deprived of these fruits in the other world (Agapkina 2002, pp. 315–16). Russians universally did not eat apples until the "Apple Feast of the Savior" (Transfiguration of the Lord, August 6/19⁶) so that children could get an apple in the other world. Serbs (Pocerina) did not allow mothers with dying children to try new fruits before they distributed them to orphans for the repose of their children's souls. Otherwise, their children would be left without food in the next world, crying and complaining that their parents had eaten their food and "chewing their fingers instead" (Milićević 1984, p. 128). Among the Southern Slavs, a similar prohibition also applied to new milk before Yuriev Day (23.IV/6.V). (SD 1995–2012, vol. 4, p. 63, vol. 5, p. 603). According to Bulgarian beliefs, there is a huge tree in the sky with milk dripping from its leaves. Many children sit under this tree and drink milk, but a child whose mother violated the prohibition was beaten with a rod and left hungry (Koleva 1981, p. 83).

The observance of such prohibitions was aimed at ensuring the welfare of deceased children in the next world. Ukrainian mothers whose children died were ordered to bring out pies, Easter cakes, eggs, bagels, and sweets on Easter or memorial days and distribute them to their children at the cemetery for the repose of their dead children (Zaglada 1929, p. 151).

On memorial days and during the Easter period, "for the sake of ancestors", in Polesie and some regions of Ukraine and Belarus, it was forbidden to work on the land (it was "hard for the dead" and "spirits are worried"); to sew ("you will sew up mother's eyes in the other world"); to wash and launder ("you will fill the eyes of the dead"); to knit yarn ("you will close the way for the dead, and they will not return"); to dance ("you will trample on your parents"); and to take revenge ("you will clog the eyes of the dead"). It was also forbidden to use sharp and cutting tools (to not harm ancestors) (Agapkina 2002, pp. 291–92; SD 1995–2012, vol. 3, p. 434).

4. Communication of the Living with the Dead

In the Slavic folk tradition, contacts between the living and the dead after their transition to the other world are strictly regulated in terms of the time (memorial days and some holidays), place (house, cemetery, etc.), means of communication, and channels of communication. These contacts, by their purposes and contents, serve the interests of living people more than the interests of the deceased. They are made primarily to placate the ancestors and confirm their favor and patronage for the living. They are mostly one-sided. The living perform certain actions (rituals), while the dead are either totally absent or play a passive role, often remaining invisible. The living only learn about their ancestors' visits by indirect signs, such as sounds and footprints (SD 1995–2012, vol. 4, 121, vol. 5, pp. 39–40). According to Belarusian beliefs, "in spring, along with the revival of nature, . . . the souls of the dead also come to life and come out of their coffins into the free light." They need food and drink, but they only eat and drink rarely: three or four times a year suffices them. To

satisfy this need and as a sign of respect for the ancestors, memorial tables are arranged on memorial days (in Belarusian—*dziady*, literally, ‘grandparents’) (Bogdanovich 1895, p. 55).

On memorial days, a lunch or dinner with many dishes was prepared for the dead. The Eastern Slavs had a custom to invite the ancestors in a special ceremonial way—for example, by going to the gate, porch, window, or door and giving them treats while calling them in a high-pitched voice (SD 1995–2012, vol. 4, pp. 269–72). A place was left for them at the table⁷, and a shot glass and separate accessories were left for them on the table or on the window sill or near icons. People put aside or poured a little from each dish onto a plate, on the table, or under the table⁸. The dishes and food were not removed from the table at night so that the dead could use them. They hung out a towel for them so that they could wash their hands before the meal; they did not close the doors at night; they took clothes out into the yard and hung them up for the dead (PA).

The Belarusians of Mogilev Province prepared a bath for the dead: first they bathed themselves and then invited the dead to wash (Shein 1890, p. 609). After dinner, the guests from the other world were dismissed. The host would then pour water on the floor from the table to the door and say: “You flew here; you drank and ate; now fly back to your place” (Ibid., p. 597). In Eastern Serbia, before the memorial meal, people passed by the table with a stick in their hands. With this stick, they symbolically drove away the souls of the dead for whom the relatives had not prepared a meal (Zečević 1982, p. 76).

Ancestors were also invited to Christmas dinner, Shrovetide, and other holidays (SD 1995–2012, vol. 4, pp. 269–72). Where the custom of feeding the souls was not observed, the dead allegedly cried and complained that they were left hungry (SD 1995–2012, vol. 2, p. 43).

It is possible to see the dead coming to one’s house through various magical means. According to Belarusian beliefs (Mogilev province), one had to sit on the stove and sit there all day without eating or talking to anyone. Then, in the evening, one would see the dead sitting at the table. One could see the dead at the table by looking from the yard through the window, by climbing on the stove and looking from there through a collar or through a sieve, by putting on an unwashed shirt that had been taken off the deceased, or by standing quietly and not responding to anything (Shein 1890, pp. 624–25). In the Russian North, at the wake of the fortieth day, small children were carried around the table and asked if they could see their father, uncle, or aunt (Barsov 1997, p. 251). Ukrainians of Chernihiv Province believed that the dead could be seen if you put on a horse harness (Grinchenko 1895, pp. 42–43).

Feeding the dead souls took place not only in the house but also in the cemetery. In Polesie, on the day following the funeral, the relatives of the deceased went to the grave and left their food from the memorial meal; it was called “waking the dead” or “carrying him breakfast” (PA). On Easter Sunday, the Eastern Slavs have preserved the custom for leaving eggs, pieces of Easter cake, candy, and vodka⁹ on the graves and—at the Dormition—apples. One of the indirect forms for feeding ancestors is by giving food from the memorial table to neighbors, passersby, and beggars (SD 1995–2012, vol. 3, pp. 408–11).

Serbs believed that the deceased in the other world are thirsty, so before each memorial meal, they performed the ritual of “pouring out water”: a girl from the family of the deceased brought three buckets of water from the well and put a pebble or a coin in the water. This water was used for cooking dinner and was then distributed to neighbors (Zečević 1982, pp. 76–77).

Besides food, water, clothes, and warmth, the dead needed spiritual food. In Western Belarus, people believed that on memorial days, the souls came home to look at their children, livestock, and household, and while no one saw them, they saw everything and everyone, and they rejoiced at the good and cried over the evil. Before dawn, they would go to the church and be served by their priest before returning to their place. Those souls who live in Hell could only look at their home and the church through the window (Federowski 1897, p. 221, No 1045).

Like many other peoples, the Slavs were known to tell stories of the dead coming to church services on memorial days, Christmas, Easter, or other days. The Slovenes believed that those of the dead who did not attend church services during their lifetime or pray enough should atone for this sin after death and attend the missed masses. On memorial days, the dead could be found on the roads, in the cemetery, in the churchyard, or in the church itself. They were dressed in white. Whoever met them had to move out of the way and greet them; otherwise, they might tear the person apart¹⁰. Outwardly, they did not seem to differ from ordinary people, but eyewitnesses reported that their faces were covered with grave soil or even that they stood in the church without heads. Beliefs about the night mass of the dead are also known to other Slavs, particularly in Moravia, Volyn, and other parts of Polesie. (For more details, see [Yasinskaya 2023](#)).

Communication between the living and the dead could be carried out not only for the sake of the welfare of the dead but also for the living. The dead, especially hanged and drowned persons, could be asked to remove a hail cloud from a village or to stop a drought ([Tolstoy and Tolstaya 1978, 1981](#)). Even the names of the dead have, according to folk beliefs, magical power. In Polesie, it was believed that when encountering a wolf, if one gave the names of three or nine deceased people then the wolf would not touch the person. In case of a fire, it was thought that the fire could be stopped by running around the house three times while shouting the names of those who had drowned (PA).

The main channels of communication between the worlds were sleep and dreams. In a dream, the dead come to living relatives to express their requests, claims, and resentments—for example, the living did not put the right clothes in the coffin, so the deceased in the next world had to walk in torn clothes or could not walk because their shoes were worn out ([SD 1995–2012](#), vol. 3, pp. 475–76; [PA 1983](#); [Vakarelski 1990](#), pp. 61–62). The deceased could also complain that they are floating in water in their grave because the living have cried so much or that they remain hungry because the living did not prepare a memorial meal for them. In such cases, the living always responded to the needs of the dead; for example, they went to the cemetery, tore up the grave, and checked to see whether the coffin was really floating in water. In a dream, the dead might ask for something necessary or warn about troubles and dangers. It was possible to transfer something to the next world at the burial of a new dead person by placing the requested object in a coffin or in the grave (Polesie, PA). Efforts were often made to convey to the deceased loved ones' greetings, wishes, and the most important news of the family's life. Such information could be in both oral and written form but especially in the texts of lamentations (This was common in the Russian North.) ([Barsov 1997](#)).

During the time that a person is not conscious and sleeps for a very long time without responding to external signals, they may be visiting the other world and communicating with their deceased relatives. The folk name for such lethargic dreams is *obmiranie* (from the verb '*obmirat*', 'to die temporarily'). Stories on this topic are widespread in Slavic folklore and medieval literature. In the stories of the Eastern Slavs, a sleeping person on his way to the next world crosses a river (sometimes fiery or with boiling resin) along a bridge (fashioned from masonry, lace, thread, or hair), climbs a steep mountain (sometimes made of glass or crystal), and then climbs a high staircase. In these stories about the journey to the other world, there are often two contradictory images: one is of a garden with light and flowers, and the other is of dark enclosed spaces. In some stories, the other world looks like a suite of rooms, each one housing sinners of a particular type. The traveler moves from one to another and watches them but is unable to communicate with them. Often, a living person who makes this journey to the other world would receive, once there, some supernatural knowledge, including knowledge about the time of their death, but on waking up, would be forbidden, under the fear of death, to reveal this knowledge to anyone. ([SD 1995–2012](#), vol. 3, pp. 462–64).

Communication between the living and the dead could take place with the help of agents of the other world on Earth, such as birds. In the Pskov region in Russia, a rare rite of "crying with a cuckoo" was recorded. In this rite, a woman who wants to talk to her

deceased husband, son, or mother waits for summer and the arrival of the cuckoo. She goes to the forest, swamp, or field and, hearing the call of the cuckoo, begins to wail, asking it about her deceased relatives: “What have you brought me, what news, is it from my daughter or from my mother?” (Razumovskaya 1984).

Another important channel of communication between the living and the dead is funeral and memorial lamentations (widespread especially among Eastern and Southern Orthodox Slavs). These poetic texts/monologs are addressed to a deceased relative and, in their content and genre, resemble personal letters. Similar to letters, petitions, and epistolary texts in general, they begin with a greeting to the recipient (usually affectionate and emotionally charged), followed by questions: how did it happen? where are you going? why are you leaving so early? where can I wait for you? when will I see you? who did you leave me for? who will take care of you there? These questions are followed by requests and wishes: take me with you; ask the Lord to take me with you; or come back just for a minute. Then, come the reproaches: why didn’t you teach me how to live without you? how will I raise my children without you? Then, come the farewells (this is the last time I will see you, goodbye), apologies (sorry, mother; farewell, dear son), expressions of gratitude (thank you, mother, for your care and upbringing; you taught me how to live, but now you have gone far away from me), inducements to action (take me with you), and other types of expressions. They very often also contain invitations to visit: come to me; come and bring my (deceased) husband with you. These invitations obviously contradict the main purpose of the funeral rite: to prevent the deceased from returning from the other world. (For more details, see Tolstaya 2019).

5. Fear of the Dead and Defending against Their Return

One of the most important antinomies of the folk picture of the world is the contradiction between, on the one hand, the worship of ancestors and the consciousness of a continuing beneficial relationship with them and, on the other, the fear of the dead and the desire to protect oneself from them with the help of magical methods and means. This fear underlies many protective actions performed by the living in relation to the dead at different stages of their interactions. These protective measures are particularly characteristic of funeral rites. Actions can be performed proactively to prevent the return of the dead but also reactively in a situation of imminent danger, when there are signs of the dead appearing among the living (particularly among relatives).

Most preventive actions of the funeral rite are designed to prevent the deceased from “walking” (returning from the other world). For this purpose, in Polesie, the death garments—the shroud, shirt, and pillow—were sewn by moving the needle from left to right, which is the opposite direction to the usual one. Moreover, the coffin was carried out with its feet forward, not through the main door but a side door, through a window, or through a specially made break in the wall so that the deceased could not find their way back. For the same purpose, a large stone, a wooden block, or branches were placed on the grave so that the deceased could not get out (Moszyński 1928, p. 210). On the way to the cemetery, the procession stopped several times at crossroads, and the coffin was turned around three times “by the sun” to “confuse the tracks” for the deceased (Kremleva 1997, p. 522). Among Kashubians, during such a stop, the corpse was turned face down in the coffin so that the deceased would not find their way home, and the procession participants covered their faces so that the deceased would not recognize them and return home with them (Sychta 1969, vol. 3, p. 331).

To prevent the deceased from returning to this world, people tried to deprive them of the physical ability to get up from the grave and walk. They tied up the whole body or only the legs; nailed clothes to the coffin; turned the corpse face down; pierced the legs with sharp stakes, needles, or knives; pierced the body with nails; put stones in the coffin; or tied around the coffin with a rope or a chain (Vakarelski 1990, pp. 85–88; Tolstaya 2006).

In different Slavic traditions, it is a widespread custom to turn benches, tables, and stools upside down in the house after carrying out the coffin or to pour out all the water

from buckets and other vessels and then turn them upside down. In the Russian North, after the coffin was taken out, the floor was swept, and the house was washed—always in the direction of the exit. Among the Poles, it was considered as being necessary to turn over the cart or sleigh on which the deceased was being taken to the cemetery and leave it in the cemetery or nearby—it was feared that if they were returned to the house, the deceased would return with them. Serbs turned upside down and left in the cemetery not only the sleigh on which the deceased had been carried but also the baby cradle that had been used to carry a dead baby to the cemetery. The Eastern Slavs left on the graves in the cemetery inverted pots or bowls, in which they had carried holy water or hot coals. After the funeral, the water was poured out, and the coals were scattered. The Serbs turned over all the water vessels in the house of the deceased, and they were not used until the end of the funeral (Tolstoy 1990). In addition to these actions, various kinds of amulets were widely used: poppies, salt, bread, consecrated herbs, an aspen stake, a knife, a lock, or an iron would be placed in the coffin. For the same purpose, a man's shirt was put in the coffin for a woman and a woman's shirt for a man, and the house and yard of the deceased were sprinkled with poppy seeds or grains (PA 1983; Tolstaya 2001).

6. Ways to Protect against the “Walking Dead”

Slavic beliefs are characterized by the division of the dead into two main categories—pure (righteous) and unclean (Russian, *zalozhnye*; Serbian, *povratnik*; Czech, *revenanti* or *nečistí zemřelí*) (Vakarelski 1939, 1990; Fischer 1921; Zečević 1982; Zelenin [1916] 1995; Navrátilová 2004, pp. 292–310). The first are those who died a normal death (that is, a natural death from old age or illness as opposed to a sudden or a violent death, such as suicide), returning from the other world at a strictly defined time, and, as a rule, they do not harm the living. The second are those who died a premature, unnatural death (for example, by suicide, hanging, or drowning) as well as people who, during their lifetime, were associated with evil spirits or engaged in witchcraft, who damage property, harm people, spread diseases, and cause misfortune, natural disasters, etc. It was also believed that a return from the dead could be made by those deceased who were worried about their survivors, especially small children, and wanted to help their loved ones and take care of them. A typical example would be a mother who died during childbirth who returned to breastfeed her baby or a deceased husband who returned to help his wife with the housework. In this latter case, if the returning husband engaged in sexual activity with his wife then the wife would fall ill or even die. Sometimes, the dead came back to express grievances that they had not been properly helped on their last journey, for example, if the proper funeral rites had not been observed or they had been poorly remembered (e.g., they were not mourned or had no dedicated memorial table) or had a poorly cared-for grave. They demanded that these situations be corrected. In all these cases, the arrival of the dead was considered as being dangerous for the living, but visits from the unclean dead were especially dangerous, and it was against these visits that special protection measures were taken (Tolstaya 2001).

In Polesie, stories about walking dead were especially widespread. People said that the dead crept into the land of the living through a hole in a grave, through a pipe on the roof of a house, or through a mouse hole. They could be invisible but could also have the appearance of pets (a dog, cat, pig, or sparrow, for example) or could appear naked or in the clothes in which they were buried. They could frighten the household; walk around the house; make noises; knock, stamp, and scatter things; overturn and break furniture and household objects; look for food and eat; scatter flour and groats; let the cattle out of the stable; shout; sing; laugh; and go to bed with the wife. Sometimes, they may even torture and kill the wife and relatives.

The mythological character known as the vampire (among the Serbs, also *vukodlak* or *lapiir*, or among the Eastern Slavs, *upir*) is very close to the image of the walking dead—a dead person who gets up at night from the grave and drinks the blood of people and cattle. Vampire beliefs are especially common among the Southern Slavs; they are much less

reflected in the beliefs of the Eastern and Western Slavs (SD 1995–2012, vol. 1, pp. 283–86; SMR 1998, pp. 73–75).

To stop the return of the deceased, a whole system of magical actions and means was used. In the Polesie tradition, warding off the dead was most commonly performed through the use of the seeds of poppies, flax, wheat, or millet and sand from the grave. It was believed that the dead person would count and collect them, and while they counted them, the morning would come, the cock would crow, and the dead person would be frightened and leave. These seeds were sprinkled on the roads and along the approaches to the house and inside the house and were poured into the well. These actions were generally performed at midnight or after sunset. It was often required to sprinkle these seeds in a certain direction (against the sun) or in a special way (for example, over the head). Iron objects were thought to have a repellent power. They were left by or on the grave or hung over the entrance to the house. People walked around the house with a scythe, axe, or poker and sometimes put a broom or bread shovel in front of the door (Tolstaya 2001, pp. 168–76).

The most effective way to stop the dead from returning was to hammer a wooden stake (made from aspen, oak, birch, or linden) into the person (in the head, in the legs, above the chest, or between the shoulders) or in the hole of the grave, under the cross, or near the house. People would also pour tar mixed with mercury into the hole of the grave or scatter hot coals around it. Hot coals would also be thrown over the threshold and scattered around the house (Tolstaya 2001, pp. 176–79).

In Polesie, as in other regions of the Slavic world, “holy” objects were seen as being effective magic tools: people lit a consecrated candle in the house or on the grave, set fire to plants and herbs consecrated in the church, watered the grave with consecrated water, and consecrated the earth from the grave and poured it back on the grave. They drew crosses on the windows and doors of the house, performed special acts of commemoration (like remembering the deceased with a pancake on the doorstep), gave alms to beggars, donated to the church, or recited different types of prayers and incantations (PA).

7. Demonologization of the Dead

Most characters of the so-called lower mythology, that is, demonic beings inhabiting Earth, in contrast to the higher, heavenly forces, are neither personifications of nature spirits, as scholars of the mythological school believed in the past, nor small demons or angels cast down from Heaven by God from apocryphal literature—those who fell on a house became brownies, those who fell in the forest became goblins, those who fell in the water became mermen, and those who fell in the field became field-spirits (Tolstoy 1974). As the latest research on Slavic folk demonology has convincingly shown, most mythological characters are the souls of the dead turned into evil spirits (Vinogradova 2000; NDP 2012, vol. 2).

According to Kazimierz Moszyński, the most prolific researcher of Slavic spiritual culture, “every person who died prematurely or, in one way or another, an unusual death becomes or may become—as is widely believed throughout the vast expanse of the Slavic world—a demon. And we have no reason to reject this popular version of the origin of many (although not all!) demons as being insincere” (Moszyński 1967, p. 420). Probably, the first to express this view on the origin of mythological characters was the Russian ethnographer and dialectologist D.K. Zelenin, who studied beliefs about *rusalki* ‘mermaids’ (Zelenin [1916] 1995). Zelenin’s concept of the origin of mythological characters from the souls of the “unclean” dead was amplified in many works on the folk demonology of various Slavic traditions. These works show mythological characters originate with the dead: mermaids are girls who died before marriage, children who died before baptism, or women who drowned; water-demons come from drowned people; house-spirits come from revered ancestors of the family; and vampires are the souls of sinners and sorcerers. The soul of a hanged man spins in a whirlwind. Moreover, some people can take on demonic features while they are still alive, as is sometimes the case for witches, sorcerers, healers,

wolves, and werewolves (See Zelenin [1916] 1995; Moszyński 1967, p. 420; Vinogradova 2000; NDP 2010, vol. 1; 2012, vol. 2).

These beliefs have been studied in particular detail in the field research on Polesie, undertaken in the 1970s and 1980s under the leadership of N.I. Tolstoy¹¹. According to Polesie beliefs, mermaids are the souls of girls who died in the week of Pentecost (*rusalka*), drowned, committed suicide, died before marriage, or died unbaptized (see NDP 2012, vol. 2, pp. 466–698). The Polesien *domovik* ‘house-spirit’, unlike its Russian counterpart (*domovoy*), resembles the owner of the house but also displays signs of a demonic character, a walking dead man or even a devil. Domovik may also have the appearance of flying snakes that bring wealth to the owner. This mythological character can develop a close connection with cattle in the form of a weasel, a snake, or a bird. It can be a guardian of cattle that either takes care of them and treats them well or harms them, torments them, tickles them, drives them around the barn, or spoils their milk (see NDP 2010, vol. 4, pp. 21–295). Children who died unbaptized or who were miscarried can manifest their demonic nature by becoming mermaids, rushing in a whirlwind, falling as a star from the sky, or turning into an owl or an eagle owl. The demonic properties of these children’s souls stem from the fact that they did not live out their assigned lifespan, did not receive baptism, and, therefore, did not become full members of society able to pass safely into the other world after death. They stayed on Earth, turned into dangerous demons, exerted power over atmospheric phenomena, and took revenge on people (especially their mothers and close relatives) for their unfortunate fate.

8. Conclusions

Certainly, the archaic, pre-Christian pagan beliefs and rituals of Slavs relating to the contacts between the living and the dead that have been examined in this article contain many ambiguities and contradictions. This can be explained not only by the fact that the evidence is drawn from different time periods (pagan and Christian) but also by the fact that various Slavic folk traditions have preserved the ancient, pre-Christian basis to varying degrees. The Western Slavs’ ideas about death and the other world depend more on canonical Christian ideas and, to a lesser extent than the Orthodox Slavs, retain pre-Christian beliefs. This explains the fact that this article pays more attention to the Orthodox (Southern and Eastern) Slavs. The Moscow Ethnolinguistic Scientific School, to which I belong, studies these regional differences, paying special attention to such areas of the Slavic world that have preserved the rudiments of paganism to the greatest extent. These include, first of all, Polesie, the Carpathians, the Russian North, and some regions of the Serbian–Bulgarian border.

In addition, it should be considered that the entire folk philosophy of life and death is devoid of logical harmony. The concept of two opposing worlds—the world of the living and the world of the dead, separated by the border of death—is not only unclear and contradictory but also, in a certain sense, incomplete. In addition to the earthly world of the living and the afterlife world of ancestors, there is a third world—the world of “lower mythology”, the world of the evil spirits. The characters in this world are descended from the dead, and they provide the most direct links between the world of the living and the world of the dead.

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Notes

- ¹ Let us note three main antinomies: 1. the antinomy of time (Life is understood both as a straight line with a beginning and an end and as an infinite circle.) (SD 1995–2012, vol. 1, pp. 448–52), 2. the antinomy of the substance of life (Both the soul and the body are considered to be the bearer of life.) (Generozov 1883; Bulat 1922; Vakarelski 1939; NDP 2012, vol. 2, pp. 16–18), and 3. the antinomy of space (The space of life and the space of death are perceived as being both opposed and inseparable.). In this article, the representations of the spaces of life and death are particularly important.
- ² According to Serbian folk ideas, in the other world, the age of a person does not change: the young dead remain young, and old people die, just like in this world. The dead are dressed in the same clothes they were buried in. The food that their relatives give them stands in front of them, but they do not eat it and only smell it. (Petrović 1939, p. 37).
- ³ For more on this metempsychosis in Slavic beliefs see (Uspensky 2006).
- ⁴ On the symbolism and sacredness of the border, see also (SD 1995–2012, vol. 1, pp. 537–40; Vinogradova 2016).
- ⁵ This type of punishment was also prescribed by popular law. In 2008, a 15th century birch bark letter (No. 962) was found in Novgorod, on which it is written: “You rented out the harvests, and whoever will mow those harvests, I will seize them and tie them around their necks and take them to the city [Novgorod]” (Zalizniak and Yanin 2009, p. 6). In the Russian North, in the Arkhangelsk Province, “in some places, a person who stole a thing is carried with it along the street in front of crowds of people; <...> a person who stole hay is led with a hay purse tied on his/her back; a person who stole firewood, with a bundle of firewood hung over his/her shoulder. . .” (Efimenko 2009, p. 217).
- ⁶ The first digit means the date according to the old (pre-revolutionary) style, which is adhered to by the Russian Orthodox Church; the second, the date according to the new, modern calendar.
- ⁷ Among the Vlachs of Eastern Serbia, the clothes of the deceased were placed on a separate chair to indicate their presence at the memorial dinner. (Zečević 1968, pp. 63–64).
- ⁸ In Polesie, in remembering the drowned, they took a plate with food to the river and poured it into the water at the place where their relatives had drowned (Moszyński 1928, p. 213).
- ⁹ Smolensk peasants believed that the dead were forgiven for their sins if their Easter treats—eggs and pieces of Easter cake—were eaten by birds (Dodrovol’sky, p. 56).
- ¹⁰ The mention of these beliefs can be found in the field notes of I.A. Baudouin de Courtenay from Resia, Italy, where he worked in the late 19th century. These notes are kept in the Archive of the Russian Academy of Sciences in St. Petersburg (Yasinskaya 2023).
- ¹¹ Information from the Polessky Archive, stored in Moscow at the Institute of Slavic Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, has been systematized and analyzed in the study ‘The Folk Demonology of Polesie’ (NDP 2010, vol. 1; 2012, vol. 2).

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