# Attitudes towards Death in Romanian Culture and Civilization

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Death – what a fascinating, yet disturbing subject! In Romanian traditional culture and civilization, death is seen as an important passage towards a superior stage of existence and that is why the great journey to the other world is regulated by an impressive typology of rites and a variety of archaic practices. The Romanian carnival of death is really complex, implying masks (Vulcănescu 1985: 192), costumes, paid professional mourners (Cantemir 1978: 193; Vulcănescu 1985: 190), games, singing, other forms of theatrical elements during the night watch of the deceased (Marian 1995: 128–130), and identity hiding forms (Vulcănescu 1985: 168–209).

But in order to understand the cultural patterns of the Romanian attitude towards death which reveals Dacian and Roman elements, as well as marks of the surrounding Slavic mentality, we have to go back in time to its deepest roots. In 440 BC, in the fourth book of his *Histories*, the Greek historian Herodotus provides the first insights of the Thraco-Dacians' religion, collected from the Greek Ionians living at Black Sea Coast: "They think that they do not really die, but that when they depart this life they go to Salmoxis" – their one and only god. Their belief in immortality was often mentioned by various sources and it explains their rituals of human sacrifice, also documented by Herodotus, to send a messenger ("the best and the bravest of them all") to their god, Salmoxis:

> at intervals of four years they send one of themselves, whomsoever the lot may select, as a messenger to Salmoxis, charging him with such requests as they have to make on each occasion; and they send him thus: – certain of them who are appointed for this have three javelins, and others meanwhile take hold on both sides of him who is being sent to Salmoxis, both by his hands and his feet, and first they swing him up, then throw him into the air so as to fall upon the spear-points: and if when he is pierced through he is killed, they think that the god is favorable to them; but if he is not killed, they find fault with the messenger himself, calling him a worthless man, and then having found fault with him they send another: and they give him the charge beforehand, while he is yet alive (Herodotus).

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Herodotus also mentioned their habit of crying when a baby was born, coming into this world full of sorrow and laughing when one of them was dead, pretending that he is to meet their God soon. Naturally, both crying and laughing were strictly ritualistic and they did not express feelings which were substantially different from ours. Ovid confirms the same mentality of the Thracians in his *Epistulae ex Ponto.* So, for our direct ancestors, death was rather a motive of joy and celebration; no mourning, no black veils, no regrets.

The Thracians' *original* attitude towards death profoundly influenced the mentality of the area becoming "the principal unifying element for the entire Balkan Peninsula", as Mircea Eliade demonstrated (Eliade 1996: 86). The sacrificial rites, although universal, are particularly strong in this area, especially on Romanian territory. Here, the violent death is seen as a form of creation (Vulcănescu 1985: 175–176) as evidenced by two of the fundamental myths of Romanian traditional culture: *Mioriţa* and *Monastirea Argeşului* (Vulcănescu 1985: 205–208).

Romanian burial rituals are profoundly rooted in this locally featured cultural ground, but, after the Roman Empire conquered Dacia, the aggressive Romanization of the area dramatically changed the funeral rites. It is well known that Ancient Rome developed much elaborated funeral rituals for its socially and politically prominent figures. The Roman *libitinarii* were professional undertakers who took care of everything: paid mourning women, musicians, and sometimes dancers and mimes. Public representation of grief became more and more ingenious. The relatives of the deceased bore masks bearing the images of the family's ancestors and they would gather together and ride in chariots at the front of a large procession through the streets of Rome. When the procession reached the forum, the deceased was displayed and a eulogy was read. Often the pomp and length of rites could be politically or socially motivated to advertise or aggrandize a particular kin group in Roman society. The Latin historian Tacitus recounted Augustus' funeral and his public mourning when the crowded streets of Rome were full of loud wailing and numerous torches.

Remembering and honoring the deceased members of the families was obviously very important, and it is interesting how these traditions were carried on and adapted in the newly conquered territories. It is abundantly confirmed by the practices and beliefs that survived for many centuries that in Romanized Dacia, wailing, mourning, dirges and torches became compulsory and the funeral ceremony integrated more and more theatrical qualities, ranging from the masks worn during the wake, to the games played at the house of the dead to the paid dirge-singers. Following Roman tradition, important people of the community were buried wearing the marks of their social and political importance, as the Moldavian Prince and scientist Dimitrie Cantemir pointed out (Cantemir 1978: 193) in his famous book *Descriptio Moldaviae*, written at the beginning of the 18$^{th}$ century.

In the cases of premature death, the theatrical structure of the rite became even more tragic and somehow reactivated the metaphor of the chosen messenger who was supposed to be the best and the bravest member of the community. The unmarried deceased was dressed as a groom or a bride so that the important moment of marriage was symbolically represented and their destiny was fulfilled. This "marriage to death", deeply rooted in Greek mythology (see Rehm 1994), is a



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complex scenario, involving the ceremony of the fir tree, which is considered a vegetable double of the young person. Romulus Vulcănescu documented the ritual of the symbolic brotherhood between the new born baby and a fir tree, proving their consubstantiality (Vulcănescu 1985: 194–196). If the boy or the girl dies young, a group of men goes to the mountains to choose the tree "which best resembles the deceased", asks the tree to forgive them for cutting it and tells it that its human brother or sister died and the fir tree must come to his or her funeral; or they lie to the fir tree that they are cutting it down for a wedding, not for a funeral (Vulcănescu 1985: 185–186). The young men bring the fir tree while singing a special funeral song, called "Cântecul bradului" (the fir tree song). Another vegetal symbol related to the funeral rite is "the tree of the deceased" (Marian 1995: 67–76), consisting of a branch of an apple (or other fruit) tree decorated with fruits, sweets and bakery in symbolic forms such as: a soul-bird, a hook, a key or stairs to Heaven, an archangel, a doll and various other shapes (Marian 1995: 115). All these offerings are given to children during the procession to the graveyard. This tree is considered to be reminiscence of the tree of life and of the scale to heaven.

In a traditional Romanian funeral song (available on *Romanian Ethnographic Landscapes*) a mother mourns her son, comparing his short life to a garden flower and with the morning dew. The most noteworthy thing about this song is the mother's conviction that her son's life is over (unlike the garden flower which will grow again). Nothing was left from the famous Dacian certitude of immortality, and no explicit Christian hope for resurrection either. He is dead forever leaving his mother "in deep sorrow". The mother also mentions that she would have lived long enough to organize his wedding instead of the funeral ceremony. An interesting variation of this motif is also present in *Mioriţa*, where the mother of the young shepherd, eventually killed by his companions, is told that her son disappeared, not because he died, but because he married an Emperor's daughter. The grief is too great to be endured. Simion Florea Marian documents many other cases of special funeral rituals dedicated to young, unmarried people (Marian 1995: 89–90, 208).

Death is visualized as a great journey to the other world for which the deceased, called "dalbul de pribeag" (the pure and white traveler) is washed, dressed in new clothing, counseled and guided, and properly mourned and honored. The whole complex scenario was reconstructed in the nineteenth century by priest scholar Simion Florea Marian in his monographic study on Romanian funeral rites. The organizing principle was to honor the deceased by recollecting his life and by projecting the great loss that the family and the society have to endure. The exteriorization of the collective pain is compulsory and that is why sometimes professional dirge-singers are hired. If the ritual is not fully and correctly performed, the deceased cannot integrate into the other world and might come back to haunt the community. This attitude is ritualistic and it does not depend on private feelings. Obviously the Roman influence was so strong that the famous Dacian "joy of death" seems almost forgotten. Some traces of it are to be found in the hilarious games (Marian 1995: 130–146) practiced during the night watch of the deceased. But was it really and totally lost in the melting pot of the multiple strata of cultural influences?

An interesting exception to the general sober attitude towards death, and a strong argument for any carnivalesque vision on it, is to be found in Maramureş,



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which is famous for being a Dacian region unoccupied by the Romans. The so called Merry Cemetery of Săpânța is a unique graveyard, and in the last decades, a tourist attraction. Here, the funeral rites are not fundamentally different from the rest of the country, but the joyful aspect of the monuments is striking. The paintings and the comical epitaphs are made in such a manner to make the family returning to visit the tomb smile or even laugh loudly as the Dacians were expected to do. Whether or not this death-related anthropologic phenomenon derives directly or indirectly from the Dacian mentality as depicted by Herodotus could be discussed forever. Is the Merry Cemetery a revival of the pre-Roman spirit? What a tempting but yet delicate question.

All the crosses evoke comical aspects of daily life, especially vices, so that going to the tombs becomes a less tragic situation. The deceased is no longer idealized as the perfect man or woman, but at Săpânța it became possible to tell the truth about the deceased and his /her mistakes, in the same manner in which comical unpleasant truths are told publically while the person was still alive.

In 1935, a wood sculptor, Stan Ioan Petraş, started hand carving oak crosses for this cemetery. He painted each cross blue, which was eventually branded as Săpânța-blue, and included a scene from the deceased's life (or death!) and a humorous poem on each cross. The paintings, simple and naïve in style, present the main occupation or a relevant aspect of their life. There are shepherds tending their sheep (Pop Gheorghe the orphan):

> Here I rest/ Pop Gheorghe is my name/ I came near my mother as she/ had left me while I was very young/ I lived as I could and I've achieved all I needed/ I raised cattle and sheep/ and I enjoyed doing that/ but I left this life at 74[1].

as the protagonist of *Mioriţa* who was projecting himself in the same manner, doing the same things after his potential death. Others are men cutting wood (The forester):

> While I was still alive/ I used to work into the forest/ where I got ill/ and I retired/ as I lost my powers./ But my poor wife/ May God keep an eye on her/ as long as she will be living/ she will take care of our kids.

and Streț Ion Ferenţoc:

> Here I rest/ Streț Ion Ferenţoc is my name./ I very much enjoyed my life but/ I couldn't live longer./ I worked a lot in the forest, with the chopper/ my dear children I tell you farewell/ but do not forget me. 63years.

Barbers are also included (The barber):

> Here I rest/ Pop Grigore is my name/ Grigore, son of Sustag/ I knew a lot of things/ and I was loved by everyone/ as long as I lived/ I gave people haircuts/ I loved my job/ in the barber's shop/ I left all of these at 52.

as well as farmers working the land, and carpenters, miners (Pop Dumitru, the miner):

[1] Unless otherwise indicated, the examples of epitaphs are my translations from the texts on the crosses.



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> Here I rest/ and my name is Pop Dumitru./ As long as I lived in this world/ I worked in a mine for a long time/ where I got badly ill/ and I retired/ I had five children/ who brought me sorrow and joy.

musicians playing their violin, butchers chopping lambs, priests (The priest):

> Here I rest/ and my name is Pop Gheorghe/ as long as I lived/ I served God/ and as I prayed to him/ he gave me a beautiful life/ God be blessed/ and I had five children/ but I buried two of them/ and I couldn't see more then that/ so I tell you farewell/ as my life is leaving me.

teachers at their desks (The teacher):

> As long as I taught in the village/ school, I educated the students/ giving them both knowledge and/ good manners/ now I am telling you farewell/ remember me mother, children, and sisters/ come to my tomb at the holidays of the deceased/ and tell everybody/ that the teacher is resting here.

We can also find about alcoholics drinking, drivers in their cars, policemen, women spinning wool or weaving rugs, housewives baking bread, and so on. They all continue to do what they used to, as if nothing happened. Death is not only diminished in importance but presented as a natural and acceptable part of daily life.

The Merry Cemetery of Săpânța defeats death by pointing out man's existence in his community as it really was. It defies not only death but also its ritual rules, simply by telling the truth about the deceased. The scene that describes the life of the deceased is painted in vibrant colors, blue, yellow, red, white and green, with geometrical and floral decorations on the borders. The traditional "soul-bird" (also see Vulcănescu 1985: 194) is always present as a motif.

But the most spectacular aspect is the text written on the crosses. The naïve epitaphs carved under the image are written in the local dialect, more often grammatically incorrect, as Petraș went to school only for a few years. The family cannot influence the text. They are spontaneous and usually written in the first person, as if the deceased himself is talking to the world about his life and death. This serene, first person speech about someone's own death is also to be found in *Miorița*, where the young shepherd confronts the possibility of being assassinated by his companions and simply tries to integrate death into his life project. The imminence of death is accepted as a fact of life, actually, the one and only certitude life offers.

Premature deaths are depicted more dramatically:

> Here I rest/ And Gheorghe Pop is my name/ Like a handsome mountain fir/ I was in my parents' yard/ Young and kind-hearted/ There were not many like me in the village/ When I finished the army/ I bought myself a car/ And the whole country I toured/ Many friends I found/ Many friends that were kind/ The way I liked/ When I was to live my youth/ In the earth I rot.

Or, another tragic destiny:

> While I was young and unmarried/ I used to dance to violin music/ But after I got married. My wife would not let me dance anymore/ I also had a child with her/ And I was very happy to raise him/ Sorinel, my son, I waited/ and longed for you to



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come near my death bed/ But your mother wouldn't let you/ and I died very upset/ and I left this life/ at only 38 years.

Also very interesting are the crimes and the accidents. The epitaph of a shepherd murdered by a bad Hungarian tells a sad story, confirmed by the image on the cross:

Rest in peace – but I do not/ Saulic Ion lies in this plot/ In the grounds of Belmezau/ I a shepherd was, you know/ A bad Hungarian had come/ And shot my head through with his gun/ He hacked my body clean asunder/ Thus I was buried six feet under.

Here is a tragic car accident and an epitaph designed as a curse:

Burn in hell the taxi cab/ That came from Sibiu town/ Of all the places in the world/ It had to hurtle down/ Right by our house, and hit me so/ That I was sent to death below/ And left my parents full of woe.

One exception from the first person rule is to be found in a rather famous epitaph of the mother in law:

Underneath this heavy cross/ Lies my mother-in-law poor/ Had she lived three days more/ I would be here and she would read/ You that are passing by/ Try not to wake her up/ For if she comes back home/ She'll bite my head off/ But I will act in the way/ That she will not return/ Stay here my dear/ Mother-in-law.

The daughter in law makes sure that her mother-in-law is satisfied with her tomb and epitaph because she obviously does not want her to come back. Fake sorrow for the deceased is no longer necessary…

Even if there is another painted cemetery in Slovakia, at Detva, where the painting is strictly decorative, the Merry Cemetery of Săpânța is unique in many ways. It gives us an important lesson of the necessity to celebrate both life and death. Today it is listed as a heritage site by the UNESCO and it is probably one of the most visited graveyards in the world.

The creator of the graveyard died in 1977, but he was sure to curve his cross long before that. After acting the roles of all his clients and creating first person lyrics for their crosses, for a lifetime, the great director of the Merry Cemetery finally distributed himself in his own role. Here is his own epitaph:

Ever since a little boy/ I was called Stan Ion Petras/ Please listen to me good folks/ What I say are not lies/ All the days that I lived/ I never wished ill for anyone/ But all the good that I could/ To whoever asked for it/ Oh this poor world of mine/ So hard was my life in it.

We cannot help but wonder: was his life so difficult because he decided to spend it fighting death and its usual perception? He definitively won this battle – he became immortal by tricking death and teaching all his fellow villagers to do the same.



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## Abstract

The paper explores the Romanian rituals of death, from a diachronic perspective, focalized on the interferences between the old Thraco-Dacian element, the Latin strata, and the Slavic vicinities, in order to emphasize the phenomena of evolution and to attempt to explain a totally unique phenomenon: The Merry Cemetery of Săpânța.

Dacians' ritual joy, who were laughing each time one of them went to Salmoxis, was profoundly altered by the overlapping of the Latin funeral rites, which imposed public exteriorization of grief and activation of a theatrical component in order to advertize the importance of the deceased's family. Romanian funeral rites gradually integrated the compulsory wailing of the deceased, sometimes performed by paid professional dirge-singers, and his/her symbolic projection into a state of perfection (the pure white traveler) which imposed idealization of his/her life, careful preparation for the great journey, and the whole ritual complex talking about the great loss that the deceased produces into society.

Nevertheless, at Săpânța, in a region inhabited by the Free Dacians during Antiquity, an ingenious wood sculptor and painter succeeded to bring back the smile into the funeral rites, at the so-called Merry Cemetery. In 1935, into the interwar Romania, firmly engaged into modernization and synchronization with Western Europe, the old Dacian attitude is spontaneously revived, transforming death into a perfectly integrated fact of life. The vibrant colors of the crosses, where representative scenes from the deceased's life are painted, sometimes ironically referring to his/her vices, and the cruelly realistic epitaphs which resume the life and activity of each villager attracted its apparently oxymoronic name of merry cemetery and transformed it into an attractive subject for the research of the anthropology of death.



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