

**UNIVERSITY BABEȘ-BOLYAI**  
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**FUNERARY PRACTICES AND THE  
REMEMBRANCE OF THE DEAD IN  
POLYPHONIC SULINA`**

DOCTORAL THESIS

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**Keywords:** funerary rites, remembrance of the dead, polyphonic anthropology, fieldwork, folklore archive, Sulina.

**Summary:**

The premise of this research aims at the fact that, in order to infer the favoured lens through which the death issue and all related events could be viewed without exaggerated dangers usually caused by both the dilettantisms and the hyper-theorizations, the researcher of the funerary domain imperiously needs to understand *whom* he/she investigates. At a first level it is about the (eventual) current subjects of different biological generations, individuals who accomplish the rite, giving it new meanings in accordance with an entire vision concerning the world, and interpret it; within this space of ground and, implicitly, of orality, the vocational ethnologist is both an interlocutor and a witness. At a second level, the only level which pursues the historical development of the folkloric act, another than the present one, as far as the script is concerned, the “at-a-specific-moment” individuals could be found after a difficult digression through texts found in specialized archives, genuine frozen testimonies dating back from the last decades of the 19th century; in addition, they may be found in those scientific meta-texts that were focused on funerary issues and which together wrote a history of such studies, one not at all straight.

Basically, these three layers structured the present work which is entitled *Funerary Practices and the Remembrance of the Dead in Polyphonic Sulina*. It covers the following ample objectives: the Romanian research query on the funeral rites, as well as the manner of construction of the existing data about these rituals in the specialized archives, for revealing a methodology with an application to the research that was conducted; a bounded dynamics of funeral practices in Sulina and understanding how they constitute a tool to configure and reconfigure at the intra- and inter-Community levels; the production and analysis of the narratives which thematized the funerary issue for detecting the mechanisms by which the research subjects signify life and death.

Somewhat canonical by the theme tackled, that of the funeral rite, the research is non-canonical by the way of approaching, the degree of novelty being marked at least at two levels. The first is that of locating the research. The space decided to represent the land

was that of a single locality, whereas the Romanian investigation dealt and deals with regional and national models. Another peculiarity of the land is the presence of a majority of a Romanian population, numerically followed by the Russians-Lippovans, while the other ethnic groups (Greeks, Turks, Armenians, Italians) have a very low representativity. Thus, it was possible a circumscribing of the manner in which the difference between the Romanians and the Russians-Lippovans was generated, on the condition of taking the funeral practices as references. Furthermore, this very last feature explains summarily the option in the title for qualifying Sulina as "a polyphonic cultural space". Furthermore, this time seen from another perspective, the concept of polyphony also informed the second level at which the degree of novelty is marked, namely that of the manner of textualizing the research results, which does not choose to configure a macromodel of practices relating to death and funeral in the town of Sulina, but tries to suggest it in the polyphonic way, by valuing the research subjects' voice, that is the stories that they themselves produce about their funeral experience. Consequently, this research is placed in line with those ethnographical theories emerging from the 80s of the last century, theories which legitimized "the paradigms of discourse, of dialogue and polyphony".

As far as it was possible, an extension of the polyphonic principle at *the level of the research sources*, using not just field data, but also those from the specialized archives, has been tried. More specifically, the second and the third section of this thesis are based upon the original materials within the Fund of manuscripts of the Archive of Folklore of the Romanian Academy in Cluj-Napoca, as well as upon those from the Archive of Folklore of Moldavia and Bukovina, respectively from that belonging to the Institute of Ethnography and Folklore "Constantin Brăiloiu" in Bucharest, which were published in corpora. Western ethnologists, anthropologists, thanatologists and historians' works have been used, as well as Romanian researchers' studies, articles and monographs that have been predominantly focusing exclusively the funeral issues over time. Then, at least for the first part of the thesis, those scientific works that were considered useful for bounding a broader context of the Romanian ethnological research (histories of the discipline or of certain periods of its evolution, bibliographical dictionaries, bibliographies, and, mainly for the Communist period and for the post-December one (1989), studies that propose critical

glances on Romanian ethnology or balance sheets, but also some reviews of contemporary editorial publications).

As regarding the methodological aspects, the starting point was the current distinction, in epistemology, between "the contexts of discovery" and "the contexts of justification" (P. Hamou). As far as this thesis is concerned, it is a distinction which would aim in an ethnological research at two levels: the first one is that of producing data and the second one is that of interpreting them, namely, their shift into a scientific discourse. As regards the production of data, there were used interviews of the "life story" type (Ken Plummer, Robert Atkinson), or half-targeted interviews and, less commonly, targeted ones, on the basis of some questionnaires drawn up by refining those already in use, but also, in the ceremonial context, the recording and analysis of what the new ethnographic theories name *speech in action* (Roger Sanjek). There is also made an appeal to the direct or participatory observation (even subject to criticism made by the anthropological Postmodernism - see Robert M. Emerson, Rachel I. Fretz, Linda Shaw) that was sometimes doubled by an audio recording or/and a video one of the documented ritual sequences. On the second level, that of *interpretation* and *implementation* of the data *in a scientific discourse*, the methodology is based on the data gained on the first level.

*The structure* of the proposed work is, beyond the introductory aspects, a tripartite one. The first part, entitled *Perspectives on Approaching the Funeral Rites in the Romanian Research*, had the challenge to bound the progressive stages of writing about the funeral practices, in the wider context of school dynamics, research trends and directions in Romanian ethnology. Having used structural records (the effective manner of dealing with the theme at one time) and contextual criteria (the micro-context of the discipline or even of certain schools or of private researchers' activity has been connected with the historical and social-political macro-context), marking the limits of six wide stages could have been made possible. The stages follow each other since the middle of the 17th century, while investigating death and funeral customs within the Romanian area. The proposed timing is not equivalent to a rectilinear history of such approaches, but, on the contrary, one could notice how rigorous studies are compared to amateurs' ones, how the usage of the theoretical acquisitions of a stage is blocked because of some macro-contextual factors in

another. From the point of view of the surroundings, the ambitions to return the national dimension of the investigated facts are completed by regional or local investigations. Also, when the dynamics of the funerary ritual is studied, some measures are placed within long terms, millennial ones, and others are related to years; but, there are also prospects anchored in Anistorism, which entirely eludes the time component. As regards the manner of writing, that is the way in which one, an ethnologist-reader, receives the information about the sphere of the funeral, a whole range of patterns could be identified: the first ethnographers' macro-patterns, the ethnological and sociological monographs, the textualist patterns or those of a great modernity that favour the investigator's or the research subjects' subjectivity. A critical analysis of what has been done up to this point regarding the study of funeral rituals is one of the two issues that allow the clarification of a personal approach to this topic, the other one being represented by the nature of the data produced by field work.

Part two – *The Funerary Experience, Narrated* – has two chapters. The first chapter proposes a deviation through the texts from the specialized archives which, within the Romanian space, came forth from the last decades of the 19th century and that was considered absolutely necessary for achieving an ethnological research that could report upon the many dimensions of the funerary practices in a certain space decided to be the investigated field. As regards the factual information contained by the archival documents, it can serve in those approaches of a diachronical type, that is, not seen as an ethnological nostalgia or a nostalgic ethnology, looking for attachments or non-attachments to previous folklore facts, but for the purpose of bounding a dynamics of the folk fact. With regards to the manner in which one receives this information, it is relevant to be pointed out that these texts are about the process that Sanda Golopenția names "memorial negotiating". In other words, the community tells about itself through the respondent who, in turn, is formatted by the grid that is given by the questionnaire and, when appropriate, by his lectures. The Archive, as a physical place and one of a social production (Paul Ricœur) acts, *ipso facto*, against time, but, through its instruments, has to act on behalf of a time that will come. And just here, at the level of the instruments, nowadays ethnologists should innovate this,

because those using the archives could find, as Arlette Farge said, *a taste for faded voices* off in them.

The second chapter valorizes following a principle of polyphonic anthropology, emerging from the 80s of the last century, the views of six of the interlocutors with whom the writer of this thesis worked in the field. Even if the perspectives that were chosen belong to subjects with varying degrees of reporting to what we usually call tradition and having the experience of different deaths (individual death versus generalized death in war; *good* death versus *bad* death; death by drowning, disease, etc.; a death interpreted with rational instrumentation versus death interpreted with the magic instrumentation), the joint note was the centring of stories on the image of a deceased/ of some deceased people that works as *figures of reference* for the speech. To a greater extent, unlike other manifestations from the social sphere, the funerary rites are centred upon the individual experience of death and structured by it, whereas the interviews generated by this subject are mostly concerned about "what it is done", then about "what have I/we done, when", or "what has happened to us when...". In other words, the narratives discussing funeral experiences do not contain, formulated in a neutral and impersonal manner, a ritual system to be applied in case of deaths, but, on the contrary, ritual solutions which proved their functionality at all deaths. A funeral anthropology on an individual scale finds its usefulness and validity because it allows the simplifying description to be exceeded so that some internal logic of the funeral practice could be grasped. Moreover, the causes of the ritual actions and their interpretations on an intra-community level may be revealed at this point.

The third part of this thesis dealt with detecting the polymorphism of the funeral practices, in the specific manner in which they are carried on in Sulina. Within this analysis a special attention is being paid to the circumscribing of a segment from the entire funerary domain, that is *the funeral repast*, moments which give temporal rhythms to memories. The case studies undertaken within the area designed to be investigated (one regarding "*Offering a Funeral Feast*" - „rite d'intérêt privé mais accompli publiquement" - in Bourdieu's terminology and the other one regarding "*The Easter of the Dead*" - „rite d'intérêt public") allowed the writer of this thesis to emphasize the complex connection which is established between *the funeral*



*repast* and *the dream*. Within the funeral context, it is quite frequent the phenomenon of narrating certain dreams in which the dead person communicates an alimentary need, a more or less complex one, or mistakes within the ritual, that are going to be named during the funeral repast. At the same time, because the dream is recounted during different situations, it is in (validated) and it validates when it is about acquisitions in the good management of the ritual. Finally, there are schematically pointed out the levels which led to structural and functional transformations of those practices regarding death and burial in Sulina. The following acknowledgement was taken into account: “all anthropological writing is history for even as one leaves the field, the culture is already changing, and by the time of publication is not the same.” (S. Ottenberg).