Representations of one’s own funeral among the contemporary Czech Pagans

The dawn of the ethnic religion revival, or what is currently referred to as contemporary Paganism in Central Europe, dates back to the late 1990s. The first generation of contemporary Czech Pagans also formed in the late 1990s and consisted mostly of individuals aged between 16 to 36 years of age, i.e., individuals far from old age, or from an age when they would think seriously about death.

On 15 December 2011, a young girl active in the contemporary Czech Pagan community tragically died in a car accident. At the end of 2011, one of the six founders of the Czech Rodná víra (translated as The Czech Native Faith) committed suicide. As the site for this act he chose a little grove near Prague, near the Slavonic settlement Zámky of Bohnice; one of the traditional rite venues of contemporary Czech Pagans. These incidents raised a question that contemporary Czech Pagans had not faced before. Death

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1 Is it well known that many contemporary Pagans prefer to avoid the notion of „Paganism.” In the Czech Republic the followers of the ancient Slavic religion, for example, use the term jazyčník. This word of Russian origin is also translated to English as „Pagan,” however, it has no phonetic connection with the Czech word “pohan”, which is considered defamatory in the Czech language. We choose to use the term contemporary Czech Pagans as an umbrella for all the Pagan groups in the Czech Republic. Most of the contemporary Czech Pagans who do not use the term “Pagan” would prefer to call themselves “Heathenists” – if they are the followers of the northern deities – or “Rodnovers” – if they are the followers of the Slavic deities.
belonged in the world of their “ancestors.” Their previous death experiences were related to friends and relatives, while all contemporary Czech Pagans were still alive.

Before we move to the actual analysis, some methodological remarks should be added. All the respondents knew in advance that their answers were going to be published. No civic name is used. On the contrary, many of the respondents explicitly made a request to save their “Pagan” nickname in a non-modified version. Except for public quotations excerpted from Facebook, all those interviewed agreed with the publication of their views. Because the author of the paper was directly involved in some of the situations he is going to describe, the work can also be considered as an example of an autoethnographic survey.

The first real death as the beginning of loss of certainty

Death in itself is an experience of confusion and disruption of reality. Psychological studies from the last century of individual and group responses to the phenomenon of death indicate that the sense of loss of the natural and social order of reality is culturally-conditioned (for examples, see Parkes, 1972). In many religions, the impact of death on the world is the one of disruption of its original perfection and harmony. The loss of balance caused by death is a collective occurrence manifested particularly in the immediate surrounding of the deceased, while it also extends to their wider environment (Di Nola, 1995, p. 175).

According to Martin Heidegger (1927), death represents a foreign event, outside of us, outside our existence and our presence (Dasein). Death is so foreign to us that we have managed to convince ourselves internally that it will not happen to us. However, the very moment death becomes real, i.e., someone we know dies – and not in a video game, on the news or in narration – an existential crisis hits.

A renowned 20th century ethnologist Ernesto de Martino noted in 1958 that “the experience of loss of the presence of a person corresponds to the ex-
experience of the loss of the world, that is then perceived as strange, disproportionate, stolid, mechanical, artificial, theatrical, pretended, dreamy, meaningless, unsubstantiated and the like” (De Martino, 1958, p. 26, own translation). Death is viewed as a “scandal,” mess, infection threatening the grieving, the loved ones of the deceased (Balandier, 1970, p. viii). Death is not accepted and recognised as a natural phenomenon. In a way, natural order excludes death: order is perceived as motion, act, renewal and continuity. Death to the living society also represents an event which triggers the return to oneself.

On the daily basis, however, we live as if we should never die, doing so via a special psychological process which Sigmund Freud called “negation.” According to him, death does not exist in our sub-conscious (Freud, 1925). In other words, subconsciously we see ourselves as deathless. Death is therefore understood as “my own death;” something that exists completely in reality and therefore cannot be represented symbolically; according to Jacques Lacan (as cited in Benvenuto, 2015) because our sub-conscious is inseparable from the symbolic argumentation, whatever goes beyond symbolism has no place in it. The symbolic is not able to produce a symbol that would represent utter exclusion of all symbols, i.e., life cannot incorporate its own death. Nevertheless, we will experience death, since death is immanent to life. Living or existing means partial and continual dying. We are giving up parts of our life as we live on. From childhood to adolescence and youth, adulthood, and old age (should we live long enough) we lose parts of ourselves as we gradually hand them over to death. Our life is thus built on death, but death and the man who dies, never meet and live to tell the tale. Therefore, the only knowledge we may have of it, is the death of others.

Only this way we understand that a body, which used to have a life and a voice, is now lifeless and mute. The human being that was alive just a few moments ago has not disappeared, but is no longer present. Martin

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2 Sigmund Freud first described “negation”, (in the German language “Verneinung”) as a defense mechanism of individuals, at the end of 19th century (Freud 1895). The 20th century discussion about “negation” is synthetized in O’Neil & Akhtar (2011).
Heidegger (1927) wrote that existence is authentic when death is depicted. Only through the acceptance of death, our *Dasein* reaches its utter and complete fulfilment. To us, death represents a foreign event, which feeds a subconscious, inner conviction – contrasting every rational belief – that in our case, death will not come. Heidegger bases the claim on the usage of “they die” phrase. He sees death as something unspecified, which one day will surely mark the end of us, but in the meantime death is not present therefore it will not befall us. The phrase “they die” expresses a belief that death happens to an anonymous “them.” This usage of “they” helps us find peace about death, while when actually experiencing death, the sense of it becomes inherent to an individual’s life and a great existential shock comes with the transition from “they die” to “I die,” i.e., from an indefinite drama to a personal and dramatically perceived fact (Heidegger, 1927, p. 239).

Death appears to be an irreversible fact which belongs to the sphere of historical certainty when perceived individually and belongs to the physio-biological certainties of a community. It becomes an internally dramatic moment once it enters the area of perception and consciousness. However, death is also inhumane because we do not accept it instinctively as it cuts man from life and from what he would normally and eternally wish to be.

The group to which the deceased belonged experiences a shock characterised by anxiety, confusion, and loss of their own sureness (Di Nola, 1995, p. 19). Every culture has developed operational systems used to release distressing situations, so that they become acceptable or bearable for the people. These systems which we defined as operational might also be termed ‘rituals’ and include funeral rituals, that is the rites of passage during which the living accompany the dead into a new dimension, which is foreign from the perspective of life. Funeral rites, however, are connected with ideological systems, including religions. And religions, as they envisage afterlife, attach exceptional importance to the fact that these ceremonies are not only performed, but performed in the way most appropriate to their own belief system.
In the past, the research of death on a societal level focused on cultures sometimes referred to as “primitive,” “savage” or in more modern terminology “tribal/indigenous.” From one point of view, these cultures might be close to the mentality, at least on a theoretical level, of the contemporary Pagans. Lucien Lévy Brull in his work *L’ame primitive* (1927), for example, explains that when the head of the family or an important group member was dying, the whole group of loved ones was in a way dying, too. Death therefore did not interfere only with the individual’s life, but through this individual it interfered with the whole group (Lévy-Bruhl, 2007, p. 656).

Bronisław Malinowski in his research among the natives on the Trobriand Islands in the southwest Pacific, confirmed the Lévy Brull’s postulate (Malinowski, 1948). The death of a member in a small community affected heavily the whole group, causing anguish and triggering their defensive instinct. In the subsequent attempts of resocialisation, which aim to transform a natural occurrence into a social one, the group's cohesion and solidarity were not affected in any way (see Fuchs 1973, p. 29; Di Nola, 1995b, p. 20).

In the Christian period the social aspect of funeral events was guided by the Church, which assumed the burden of organising funerals and liturgical rites helping to overcome the related anxiety of the grieving community. Since 1948, the Catholic Church has lost its monopoly in funeral organization in the Central and Eastern Europe. It seems worth pointing out that gradually the Catholic Church has later also lost this post in the Western world.3

The problem of the first contemporary Czech Pagans and other ethnic religions representatives in East-Central Europe is that unlike officially recognised religions rarely do they have the support of parents or older members of the same religious belief. This means they have no direct link to the past like other religions do and their religious tradition had been

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3 That the Church is irrevocably losing control over the management of the ritual associated with the transition from life to death became clear in the late 20s of the last century to the German historian and anthropologist Bernard Groethuysen, who analyzed the question in his work named *Philosophische Anthropologie* (Groethuysen, 1931).
interrupted for many centuries. Therefore, we can say that the contemporary Czech Pagans represent modern religious innovators, people on the peak of their physical strength perceiving death as extremely remote from their individual existence. Of course, we do not claim that death was not present in a symbolic form in various rituals of the first organised groups of ethnic religions, especially religions associated with the winter solstice or the monthly phases of the winter months.

Many representans of the first generation of contemporary Czech Pagans had been politically active before they engaged in the sacral area of life. Their peculiarity, however, is in the fact that they have managed to find a conciliatory and fraternal way of coexistence despite having opposing political origins. On the one hand, there were active members of extreme nationalist right, and on the other there were pacifists and environmentalists, sometimes with anarchist or Marxist backgrounds. Possible differences were not related to today’s world views, but to the way of perceiving the history of the European nations (which is particularly true among Heathenists and Rodnovers). Basically, one group idealised the honour of a warrior, while others sought rural matriarchy. On the margin of these mythicised ideas the following ideological funeral forms could be observed: cremation for “warriors,” inhumation or even double burials for “non-warriors.”

4 The fact that the ancient Slavs practiced double burials was proven by Evel Gasparini (1958) and it was also accepted in Religious studies by Mircea Eliade (1983, p. 77).

The first attempt to coordinate and organize Pagan funerals

The first cases of death among contemporary Czech Pagans involved relatively young persons. The first one was a very young girl belonging to the second generation of Czech Pagans. She will be called here by her Pagan name, Rowen. For the second person we will use his Slavic name: Stanislav. Stanislav was a little over twenty years old when he became an active member of the extreme right-wing political group and only 23 years old when he founded Rodná víra. Rowen and Stanislav both died a violent
death. Moreover, as already mentioned, Stanislav took his own life. The choice of location for his suicide was not accidental, although Stanislav’s message has never been deciphered; but given the fact that an earlier death of another Pagan (that is, Rowen) occurred, some representatives of the contemporary Czech Pagan community began to feel the urge to have their own organizational system of accompanying the dead to the other world: “I would like to establish something like a funeral company that would deal with the issues of transition to another world. Funeral services for all Pagans…” (Brothrjus Wulfe, January 12, 2012).

Brothrjus Wulfe, in cooperation with the author of this paper, called a convention of the Czech Pagan community in January 2012 entitled “An assembly on the occasion of establishment of the pagan ‘Funeral association’.” The first response to the idea was positive, judging by the reactions on the Internet:

From the perspective of my faith and my belief I would like to accompany my loved ones on their final journey in accordance with my belief. And from a purely pragmatic point of view, more frequent pagan and somehow “different” funerals would surely catch the attention of the public… (Rushwolf, Facebook, January 27, 2012).

... I want to express my support. I would really appreciate this! (Gargamel, Facebook, January 27, 2012)

...That would be great! (Meri, Facebook, January 27, 2012).

The atmosphere at the “assembly”6, which began February 1, 2012, based on my personal memories and testimonies of other Pagans present in the meeting was exceptionally constructive. Seven basic points characterising the future Funeral association were drafted as follows:

1. Search for possible, not utopian solutions;

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5 At the time, ethnic religions lacked strong and qualified representation as at the turn of 20th and 21st centuries.
6 Quotation marks are used as the word “assembly” is considered slightly exaggerated, since it was merely an extended meeting of contemporary Czech Pagans.
2. Find out which types of funerals are possible in Czechia;

3. Create a commission to research the funeral agencies on the market and to assess which of them would be willing to cooperate with the Funeral Association;

4. Upon finding a funeral agency (one or more), define which services they would be willing to provide in cooperation with the Funeral Association;

5. Invite all Pagan groups to submit their specific ceremonial requirements;

6. Provide guidance to all Pagan groups so that they can perform their preferred kind of burial ritual in accordance with the laws of the Czech Republic;

7. Do not discriminate any kind of the Pagan tradition.

The initiative was termed “The Land of Ancestors” (in the original Země předků) and received support of the magazine of the Czech Pagan society Kolovrat, which was beginning to be published at that time. The author of the article published, Jakub Achrer, defined the activities of “The Land of Ancestors” as follows: “It is a very noble idea, going beyond the time frame in which we usually think.” (Achrer, 2012).

“The Assembly” continued to debate in the following weeks, on the days of 8 February, 7 March and 28 March, 2012. After the last date, the initiative suddenly stopped. The extraordinary initial interest faded even faster than it had flared up. In the summer of 2015, I wondered what might had happened in March 2012 and what caused the end of the initiative “The Land of Ancestors”. I was one of the first representatives of the Czech Native Faith, however, my section, called “The Mokosh’s family,” had been organizationally dysfunctional for a long time. Meanwhile, a whole new generation of young, very active and less ideological Pagans has grown up, and again, there was a feeling that the issue of funerals in the Czech Pagan community should be reconsidered. Therefore, I turned to Brothrjus
Wulfe, who was the main initiator of the “assembly on the occasion of establishment of the Pagan Funeral Association” in an effort to understand the reasons for the failure of the first attempt.

He reported on March 7, 2012:

A certain young man who engaged in necromancy came to the assembly. He did not seem to have understood anything of the conference on burying which was on the agenda that day. He also considered all rituals to be completely unnecessary. The man had a serious voice so he seemed adult. He was, however, only 16 years old and had a great desire to become the centre of attention. (Brothrjus Wulfe, August 7, 2015).

After this peculiar episode, the consensus that had prevailed during the first two meetings was disrupted. For example, a representative of the Czech Pagan society (ČPS), probably the most numerous pagan organization in the Czech territory today, decided to resign from active membership at the “assembly” (Zahrada, June 16, 2016). The situation became even more complicated by the fact that on 28th March an official funeral agency employee, i.e., a man who had never dealt with pagan burials, presented a paper upon which the Pagans literally panicked, because the speaker proved pagan burials “impossible” according to the Czech legislation:

Today, as before, I still consider the establishment of a pagan funeral agency to be impossible. My scepticism by no means stems from an effort to damage the Pagan community. Perhaps they presented the issue in a wrong way. (Ivan, August 9, 2015)7

Nevertheless, it was later found out that the interpretation of the relevant legislation was wrong. In fact, the Czech legislation on funerals and funeral venues is rather favourable to the cause. Also, the place of depository of human remains does not necessarily have to be a traditional cemetery as confirmed by a leading expert on funeral law in the Czech Republic Tomáš Kotrlý (2013), as well as by three young Czech and Slovak ecologists who opened the first cemetery with a zero impact on the natural environment

7 Ivan is an Orthodox Christian who was working for a funeral agency in the year 2012.
in June 2015. This initiative, which is nowadays highly appreciated by the current Czech Pagan community, was titled “To The Roots” (Ke kořenům).

A new generation of contemporary Czech Pagans: a renewed interest

Even though a Pagan funeral agency, like the one planned in 2012, does not currently exist in the Czech Republic, it seems there has been a surge of interest in solving the issue of transition from life to death, albeit through different kind of activities and less utopian forms. Some of the respondents provided me with the visions of their own funerals:

I picture the ceremony as a small ritual ... the priestess and priest would open with a ritual speech... then in the middle of the ritual it would be nice if people remembered me by sharing a few memories of me and so on... and then there would be some ritual ending. (Alli, May 27, 2016).

I would like to have a merry ceremony to commemorate all the beautiful moments that I had with my loved ones. (Cairo, May 27, 2016).

I would like my funeral to be an event where people who knew me would meet, no matter what social circle they belonged to. So that those who came would learn about the other aspects of my life, rather than just those they already knew. I want everyone to be able to say goodbye to me the way it would suit them. I would definitely prefer it to be with an uplifted spirit, as a “celebration” of my life, not in a mourning style. (Nariel, May 28, 2016).

I would like my body to be buried in the morning somewhere in the gorges of the northern woods near Mácha lake, with a small mound built over it and a toast ritual for the mourners, and would not mind a bit of alcohol poured over my grave... (Airis, May 29, 2016).

My closest should be present and should be wearing white clothes as a symbol of the transition and ascension of my soul to the next level. During the ceremony, some of my songs should be sung to pay respect to my work, then songs

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8 On the other side, according to Tomáš Kotrlý (2011), the current Czech legislation does not allow for the possibility of postmodern treatment of a human corpse, such cryonization, freeze-drying also known as lyophilization, composting, etc.
of detachment, farewell and good wishes for the soul should be sung. There should be the sounds of shamanic drums, flutes… (Taliesi, May 29, 2016).

I do not want people to be sad. They will be, but I would like them to have fun. To get drunk, and to enjoy it. I want them to remember what we had together, the nice things, the fun, to be happy that I now have an inexhaustible supply of mead and that I am laughing at them for having to pay for their mead. I want people to remember the funeral as a good-bye to me, not as a “day of grief.” (Tenshi, May 29, 2016).

Ideally with friends and family present. (Cody, June 4, 2016).

The main criteria are that it must not be gloomy, it should be a celebration of life, a proper booze-up party. The soul returns to its roots, so it is not a bad thing. It would be best to expose my body, have a speech about what happened, where my soul is going, etc., and then a spiritual ceremony where they would make sure that the soul peacefully gets where it should be. There would also be a wake, and priests and immediate families would join in, but the party and the ceremony would take place at the same time. (Meri, June 14, 2016).

The debate regarding the type of funeral rites (cremation, inhumation, or double burial) was often a heated one. For example, should the contemporary Pagans accept the division proposed by Kamila Velkoborská (2008), we can then state that in Rodná víra the “warriors” believed in the so-called Indo-European ideology and affiliation of the Slavs to the great Indo-European family. This meant that they accepted the hypothesis of cremation of their dead, as stated already at the beginning of last century by Lubor Niederle (1911). On the other hand, the “non-warriors” questioned the existence of the great Indo-European family, as presupposed by linguists of the 19th century, so they were more inclined towards inhumation, or more precisely to a double burial, which was the original Slavic rite, and as such it was preferable (maintaining the right of “warriors” to be buried according to their wishes). The new generation is either unaware of the issue or simply treats it without bias or animosity. We can find those who prefer inhumation,
I have not thought about the specifics much, but cremation is certainly unacceptable for me. I want to return to the ground, at the moment the Czech ground, but it might change with time. (Jarmila, May 30, 2016).

I imagine being buried at the roots of a tree, accompanied by a ritual that would be invented for this occasion, and based on what I love to help me and my loved ones ease the transition. I trust my husband and best friends, fellow Pagans in this. After all, we made up our wedding ritual too. I guess there should be an offering to Mother Earth, the time for memories, music, speeches from the heart and then stepping into a new future and letting me go. So it should end positively as the beginning of a new journey. I would like to mark the place so that the bereaved could come there – most likely a tree which would grow from the nutrients provided by my decomposing body. (JeLenka, May 27, 2016).

I would like my body to stay in one piece so that it would turn into the countryside and a new life continuously and through the natural processes. (Airis, May 29, 2016).

as well as those who prefer cremation:

Ideally, I would like to be ritually burnt, preferably at the stake and have the ashes scattered on my favourite place, which is in the woods, so that plants can thrive on it. (Cairo, May 27, 2016).

Cremated and ashes buried in the roots of a tree... (Alli, May 27, 2016).

I imagine being burnt at the stake, but it is not possible to do, I’m afraid. So I would like to be buried in a pagan burial ground, I mean my ashes. I do not want to be buried in the ground, to have a stone ship made on my grave, as the Vikings used to do, the outline of the ship made of stones. I want trees all around, I want it to be a nice place so that when I return I would like it there. But it is a real a shame that I cannot be burnt at the stake, where the wind would blow my ashes around, it would be so much better. (Tenshi, May 29, 2016).

To tell the truth I have not given my funeral much thought, but I imagine being burnt and have the ashes buried near some large tree, that meant something to me during life. Let our bones rest in our favourite place, a place that was close to our hearts, a place we often visited and regarded with respect during our lifetime. (Tinka, May 2, 2016).
Burning or scattering of the ashes somewhere in the countryside. (Cody, May 4, 2016).

Or those who prefer inhumation upon completion of the decomposing processes of the body:

I would like it if my skull could stay with the relatives. (Meri, May 14, 2016).

All in all, the initiative “To The Roots” is well known among Czech Pagans, in some cases very well, in others by hearsay:

I really like the new trend of natural funerals… (Alli, May 27, 2016).

I do like the initiative of the former Environmental students from the Faculty of Social Studies: “To the roots”. What I also like is the fact that the girls offer psychological counselling – bereavement counselling, for the bereaved, so I would also definitely want my family to have the counselling… (JeLenka, May 27, 2016).

I like … now I do not know if it is done in the US or the UK … the burial in the ground with just a stone on top… (Thorn, May 27, 2016).

Conclusion

The respondents provided us with a picture of how the contemporary Czech Pagans may envision their own funeral. Although, on the level of qualitative analysis generalisations are not possible, it is interesting that they share a vision of mourners as a joyful company rather than a silent, contemplating one – which is the current mainstream Catholic/Christian ritual practiced in both cemeteries and halls of crematories.9

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9 On the questions regarding the current funeral ritual practiced in the Czech Republic, we realized a quite in-depth study during the first half of the first decade of the 21st century (Maiello, 2005).
Bibliography


**Interviews**

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Brothrjus Wulfe (2012), male, 44.

Cairo (2016), female, 39.

Cody (2016), male, 40.

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Jarmila (2012), female, 47.


Ivan (2015), male, 46.


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Taliesi (2016), female, 27.

Tenshi (2016), female, 23.

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Thorn (2016), female, 19.

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